

We Need to Talk: A Review of Undoing Border Imperialism

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Undoing Border Imperialism

Harsha Walia, 2013 (Oakland, CA: AK Press/Institute for Anarchist Studies)

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This is a book from the frontlines of the struggle against global imperialism. The primary author is a well-known activist based in Vancouver, BC, and she incorporates writings and thoughts from members of No One is Illegal (NOII) groups across Canada. Harsha Walia is particularly explicit about the importance of recognizing the many other voices within a book that is ostensibly the work of a single author. She challenges the individualistic notion of leadership by including numerous other contributions in a variety of different formats and consistently reminding readers that the ideas in this book are not the product of any single person. The book includes short pieces by more than a dozen other activists as well as an entire chapter devoted to a round-table discussion between fifteen different people who are connected in some way to one of the many NOII groups across the country. It is organized broadly into a discussion of the concept of border imperialism, a description of the structures and history of NOII, a chapter of theoretical considerations, and a final section focused on tactics and practices of resistance and how lessons learned in the past can be used in the future.

This book is of particular interest to those people who are engaged with both social justice activism and who also work with or within the sometimes privileged and disconnected world of academe. Walia recognizes that there is skepticism about combining activist and academic work, but she argues that discussions and debates about 'theory' and 'meaning' are critical within activists' communities. Academics often easily make use of privileges and resources that are difficult for other people to access. This includes the privilege of having a great deal of time to research and write about social change if they wish. However, it is often difficult to make use of the resulting knowledge to further political goals outside of the academic world and within activist groups. This book makes a considerable effort to open up some space for dialogue between academics and activists.

Walia recognizes that most people (and most activists) do not share in the privileged academic space of comfortable reflection and study, but she argues that gaining access to the knowledge produced in academe is an important component of fighting for social change. Social activists work hard to implement social change, but there is often little time for extended reflection for those who are trying to get by under the weight of a variety of oppressive structures and practices. Walia describes how the traumas that people have suffered and the ways in which they have adapted to oppression spill over into social justice movements. She calls for the creation of more community spaces for discussion and debate that will provide individuals, and the movement as a whole, with a forum for analysis, reflexivity, and building new theoretical understandings of both the mechanisms of oppression and the possibilities of freedom.

One of the crucial but often controversial components of an anti-oppression movement that would benefit from this sort of reflection, and is addressed in this book, is the role of leadership. This has long been an abstract concern amongst anarchist theorists, and it is an important topic amongst many activists who are inspired by anarchist ideas. Walia describes how elitism, arrogance, and self-interest amongst self-styled movement leaders have often destroyed specific social justice movements from within. However, cries for more 'democratic' structures have often led to a reproduction of dominant 'liberal' styles of representation, or an incoherent structure full of informal and unrecognized power relations. She argues that the issue of leadership is best explored in an open, reflexive, and grounded manner and can be developed in different ways amongst different groups of people.

Walia argues that leadership need not be authoritarian and that practices of leadership can and should be shaped to recognize the differential power structures that exist within each group. When these power relations change, so should the structures of decision-making. She uses examples from NOII-Vancouver (Indigenous Coast Salish territories) to show how leadership can be encouraged amongst those whose voices have been denied or discouraged in other organizations. Through discussions that are reflexive and open, structures of leadership can be formed around an anti-oppressive analysis that works to encourage the development of leadership amongst many different people in the group. The intent to share, rather than control, skills and knowledge, leads to very different decisions about how leadership is practiced and this can lead organizations in profoundly different directions. She notes that this type of leadership was inspired by Indigenous self-governance as well as by considerations stemming from political theory.

This discussion of leadership is just one example of the ways in which the struggle against border imperialism is fought both inside and outside of groups committed to social justice activism. Walia presents a broad definition of border

imperialism that requires the sort of reflexive analysis of praxis exemplified by the discussion above. As Walia understands them, borders are not just abstract lines on maps but are social facts that separate people in many different ways. This is a critically important point that NOII tries to get across in its political message. Border imperialism, the central focus of this book, is not just a manifestation of state borders and immigration controls but is present in every aspect of people's lives whether they have moved from one country or have remained in one place. For Indigenous people in particular, it is clear that they have not crossed the borders, but the border crossed them. 'No one is illegal!' is a fierce cry of opposition to the ways in which this globalized border imperialism works in the lives of individuals. The increased surveillance within and around borders means that anyone, anywhere may find themselves declared 'illegal' for being in a space where they are not authorized by agents of imperial enforcement (who may be directed by either public or private masters). Huge areas of the world are subject to the type of rule that is often assumed to exist only at border checkpoints. 'Border' enforcement agents are allowed into workplaces, homes, and public spaces to harass, intimidate, abduct, deport and incarcerate people who have been defined as illegal whether or not they have crossed a state border. This book describes a few of these experiences both within the main text by Walia as well as within the poems and stories by others.

Given this understanding of border imperialism, border enforcement is not meant to 'protect' what many people assume to be the borders of a specific state but is enforcing the exclusion of specific social, economic or political classes. For example, the exclusion of First Nations from settler communities in Canada is highlighted in this book. This exclusion continues to be developed and enforced as borders are shifted and redefined both across the land and through communities. The separation of children and parents amongst Indigenous communities is aptly described by Walia as genocidal and continues to take place in order to enforce these borders. It is a racialized border that is enforced both through economic means and through the blunt force of child abduction and the killing of First Nations people across the land. The Canadian state has little interest in solving these crimes because they are complicit in them, and they are useful to maintaining the border between the settler communities and Indigenous peoples. NOII has made these connections on both a practical level of working with Indigenous peoples and theoretically by seeing that one of the commonalities amongst many of the different forms of oppression that are justified by national borders is the broader concept of border imperialism, which defines the Canadian state more accurately than the 49th parallel.

The global nature of border imperialism means that Canadian 'border enforcement' is extended around the world to places like Afghanistan and Palestine through both military and economic means. However, these borders

are only one mechanism amongst many that are used to create a powerful and interlocking system of oppression. An important part of dismantling these systems of injustice is to be aware of how each of these systems work and to develop opposition that is strongly grounded in communities of resistance. NOII is one example of such a community (or group of communities). This book is a valuable part of the discussion of how to fight back against a resilient system of inequality and exploitation. NOII is inspired by an anarchist heritage and gives people the opportunity to analyze how this complex system works together on many fronts, including anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, environmental justice, and Indigenous self-determination movements. This book is a worthwhile source of ideas for anyone who is interested in participating in this struggle.