What is Radical Imagination? Indigenous Struggles in Canada

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Abstract

 Radical imagination is reenvisioning your existence on this land without the inherited privileges of conquest and empire. It is accepting the fact of a meaningful prior Indigenous presence, and taking action to support struggles not only of social and economic justice, but political justice for Indigenous nations as well.

In order to answer the question of what is a radical imagination, I am going to have to back up a bit. About 500 years. This longer-term, bigger picture view of the Indigenous struggle is quite consistent among Indigenous people across the continent. I am going to boil it down theoretically, and put the explanation right in front of you: we have never really resolved the problem of colonization’s theft of our lands, its imposition of foreign sovereignties and laws on our nations, and its forced acculturation of our people to European ways of life. We have not resolved the problem of the European imagination of this continent as terra nullius, a land empty of civilization, culture, law, governance, and empty of people worthy of respect. And today, this imperative of conquest has been transformed semantically into the assumption of “development” and a variety of state programs to that effect. The principles of international and inter-species respect and co-existence that governed this land for millennia have, since the arrival of Europeans, been obliterated in the newcomers’ drive to remake this place and its inhabitants in the image of their bible and the other founding texts of imperialism.

It is this image, and the unending commitment of Euroamericans to the vision of their ancestors which is at the root of the problem we face. Radical imagination...? In today’s North America this would mean rejecting the image of this land and everything on and in it as mere resources for capitalist enterprise. Would it be possible for people cultured in the North American mainstream to reimagine themselves in relation to the land and others and start to see this place as a real, sacred homeland, instead of an encountered commodity destined to be used and abused to satisfy impulses and desires implanted in their heads by European imperial texts? I am not the one to answer this question. All I know is what I see happening around me; and the actions of the newcomers today do not look much different from what I imagine my
ancestors saw when they confronted earlier generations of biblically- and economically-inspired Europeans.

So the problem of colonization, which true Indigenous struggles are confronting and not cooperating with, is not one of an historical era. Colonization is not just Redcoats, muskets and felt hats. It is not even just priests in residential schools. It is you. It is this continual living process of the renewal in the minds of Canadians and Americans of the ancestral fantasies of dispossession, domination and assimilation that were at the foundation of their forebears’ colonial enterprises. North American society has never collectively confronted the root of its existence in this land; it is a poisoned root of racism and brutality and fraud and abuse. The successful colonization of North America has allowed Euroamericans to transform the foundational elements of the old colonial imagination into a dynamic cultural, political and legal framework which serves to rationalize the illegal and immoral displacement, dispossession and deculturation of the human societies and human beings whose homeland this continent truly is. It has allowed for the creation of the Canadian and American states and for the creation of national cultures in which every citizen of Canada and the United States forms his or her identity.

In this intellectual, cultural and political environment, imagining a relationship with Indigenous peoples outside of the colonial context is virtually impossible. Beliefs about the natural supremacy of the white race, the inherent superiority of European culture, the uncritical acceptance of the validity of science and technological advancement, continual expansion, capitalism… these are the legacies of the colonial imagination, and they have stained Euroamericans’ sense of their place in the world and their relation to others. Canada and America were created out of a mission of divine conquest and colonialism, and any adherence or affinity to Canadian or American identities implies the restatement and revitalization of this bizarre racist arrogance and its institutional and structural forms: colonialism. I believe that most North Americans’ imaginative capacity to regenerate and re-form relationships with the land and with Indigenous peoples is limited by the inherent and embedded colonial character of the state and of culture in Canada and the United States.

In order to decolonize, Canadians and Americans have to sever their emotional attachment to their countries and reimagine themselves, not as citizens with the privileges conferred by being a descendants of colonizers or newcomers from other parts of the world benefitting from white imperialism, but as human beings in equal and respectful relation to other human beings and the natural environment. This is what radical imagination could look like.
But the process of colonization is on-going because the objectives of white society, as they relate to Indigenous people, have not really changed. First Nations people as a whole do not feel that things have changed all that much on a fundamental level from the very first days of first contact when Europeans came looking for land, intent on taking down our societies, our authorities, our laws and our governments. Non-natives came looking to transform our culture and our way of being in the world, to change us so that we reflected, or at least didn’t contradict, the values and the ways of being of the new Euroamerican society that was emerging on this continent. Colonialism is a living process because land is still being lost, our authorities, laws and governments are still not respected, and Euroamericans are still consuming to excess everything in their path. When questions of culture come up, it is still the question of Indigenous peoples accommodating or adapting to new cultural ideals from within Canadian society, as opposed to having our cultural values, norms and way of life fundamentally respected.

If you think about the history of this country, you most likely recall a version of the dominant narrative or story that is interwoven through the public discourse, in the media, in movies, in television and in the school systems. It is one of conquest, or one which shows the First Nations as a problem. The “Indian problem,” a phrase used historically and today to dehumanize and deligitimate, was at first that the Indians were in the way. When the non-native people came from Europe, they were looking for land to build their societies. Some were escaping persecution. They were escaping whatever situation it was in Europe that drove them away from their ancestral home to come here and take what we had. There were a lot of different reasons that people came from Europe. But they came here uninvited to our home nonetheless, and the problem is that this is our homeland and all the land is owned, by us. That situation had to change, because otherwise there could not be the establishment of the vision and the dream that the people from Europe had for themselves in this territory. All kinds of legal principles were imagined, developed and implemented in order to achieve this in a legal sense. It was also done in a physical sense. It was done through financial incentives.

But if you think about it, the first relationship, in spite of some of the conciliatory rhetoric that we see on both sides, romanticizes it a bit. The reality is that First Nations and non-native relations were characterized by conflict and violence from the beginning. Think about it in relation to issues like the Oka Conflict 20 years ago or the Six Nations-Caledonia conflict today. Whether you want to focus on these, or whether you want to focus on conflicts that have gone on in the last generation or two, they are always rooted in Indigenous people being in the way of something that non-native society wants to do with the land. People can say, “Well, you know, things were different back then, 200 hundred years...
ago, and things are different now." But, in reality, how different are they? There is always the continual development, the so-called "progress" of North American society, and there is always the impediment posed by Indigenous people wanting to retain their homes and to continue their ancestral connection to the land. It is still the reality today, even though the land base of the First Nations people has been shrunk. Whatever is left is still open for development and Indigenous people are still targets for conversion, except that now, instead of imagining us as Christians, Canadian society is taken up with imagining us as consumer-citizens. But the intent and the effects of this understanding of who we are together on this land are the same as they have always been.

From an Indigenous point of view radical imagination is not an exercise in pie-in-the-sky dreaming, nor does it even require much creativity. Radical imagination is simply Euroamericans deciding to leave the old visions of conquest and privileges of empire behind and focusing on their responsibilities as human beings today. Learn the history of this land. Find your own place and that of your family in the story of North American colonization. This will tell you what you need to do to make amends for that history and point the way to grounding yourself as a true person of this place. Ask Indigenous people about the promises that were made by your ancestors, the commitment that allowed for your existence here, and then decide to honor those promises right here and right now in the best way that you can. Live up to the basic tenets of universal concepts of justice: do not tell lies. Give back what you have stolen. If you could imagine a renewal of our relationship built on these premises, on your responsibility and your action to undo colonization, and if you have the integrity to dedicate yourself to working with us Indigenous people towards its realization, towards a renewed regime governing this land, then and only then could you truthfully call yourself a radical.

Endnotes

1 Taiaiake Alfred is from Kahnawá:ke in the Mohawk Nation and is a professor of Indigenous Governance at the University of Victoria. Taiaiake has also worked as a land and governance researcher and advisor on cultural restoration projects to his own and many other First Nations governments and community organizations since 1987. He’s the recipient of a Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Studies, the award for best column writing by the Native American Journalists Association, and a National Aboriginal Achievement Award in the field of Education and is the author of three books: Heeding the Voices of Our Ancestors and Peace, Power, Righteousness from Oxford University Press, and Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom, from the University of Toronto Press.