

In Defence of Indigenous Participation in Capitalism

How Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation Demands Rights and
Resources from the Liberal Democratic Settler-State while also
Challenging the Imposition of Colonial Rule

L. Javed Sommers

MA, CPA, CMA

ABSTRACT

Much Indigenous studies scholarship asserts that Indigenous peoples must reject capitalism. On the other hand, many (scholars and non-scholars alike) assume that the success of Indigenous communities depends on their willingness to uncritically embrace capitalism. Utilizing Kevin Bruyneel's *The Third Space of Sovereignty*, this article argues that First Nations can both demand "rights and resources from the liberal democratic settler-state" and challenge "the imposition of colonial rule." In other words, First Nations can simultaneously participate in capitalism and further their sovereignty, and Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation provides an example of how this might be done.

Some 'positionality' comments are in order: I am a settler, born and raised in Canada; I am a designated accountant working for Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada; besides accounting, my academic background includes two religious studies programs (Bachelor of Arts, Taylor University College; Master of Arts, McGill University) both of which focused heavily on the role of worldviews in Ancient Near Eastern society and extant texts, particularly Hebrew biblical literature. Now, I am a part-time Master of Arts student at the Faculty of Native Studies, University of Alberta. My exposure to First Nations in Alberta through my work, my understanding of worldview through my prior academic experience, and my economic awareness as an accountant, have made me interested in exploring how worldviews impact economic relationships between First Nations and settler entities (e.g., corporations, governments). I am convinced that consciously thinking about worldviews while negotiating/developing economic relationships can result in relationships that are of greater benefit to both parties. Ultimately, I see economic relationships negotiated and developed in this way as an opportunity to further Indigenous sovereignty.

INTRODUCTION

This article stems from a graduate term paper I wrote in late 2015 grappling with the following question: can First Nations both participate in capitalism and assert their sovereignty in a way that is not entirely inconsistent with their values and worldviews? I was posing this question while ensconced within the nearly ivied walls of Pembina Hall (one of the University of Alberta's original buildings) as a question of academic interest, but in fact the question also has enormous real world implications.

There is considerable Indigenous studies scholarship that is quite forceful in its assertion that capitalism and Indigenous worldviews and Indigenous sovereignty are incompatible. In the face of this, my contention in this article is not that capitalism is always consistent with all Indigenous worldviews, or that any Indigenous people should wholeheartedly embrace capitalism uncritically. Rather, I make the more-nuanced argument that given the realities facing Indigenous peoples within Canada, First Nations can participate in capitalism in a way that reflects their worldviews and furthers their sovereignty.

To make this argument, I apply Kevin Bruyneel's (2007) work on the "third space of sovereignty" to the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation (ACFN) in northern Alberta. Bruyneel's book discusses Indigenous peoples (mainly in the United States) as residing in an awkward, ill-defined "third space," neither completely foreign, nor exactly domestic. He refuses the binary of seeing Indigenous people as "either inside or outside" the temporal and spatial boundaries of U.S. politics, and instead focuses on how Indigenous peoples have worked and continue to work "on and across these boundaries, drawing on and exposing their contingency to gain the fullest possible expression of political identity, agency, and autonomy" (Bruyneel, 2007, p. 6). In other words, Indigenous people engaging in "postcolonial resistance" work "against the system as a whole" *and* work "within the system" (Bruyneel, 2007, pp. 20–21). This is what I contend ACFN does well.

ACFN is an ideal community to study through Bruyneel's lens, because ACFN's engagement with wider Canadian society stands out among First Nations in Alberta as exceptionally prominent and savvy, providing ample sources for consideration. Moreover, ACFN is relatively unique in Alberta as a First Nation that is both:

- (a) highly integrated in the wider, capitalist economy, at least in part due to its proximity to resource extraction industry, which positions it to benefit significantly from employment and business opportunities; and
- (b) assertively resistant to colonialism, motivated to some extent by the devastating environmental impacts resource extraction activity has had on its territory.

This combination of capitalist integration and colonial resistance has resulted in ACFN becoming, to borrow words from Bruyneel, an example of a "political actor" working "across ... spatial and temporal boundaries, demanding rights and resources from the liberal democratic settler-state while also challenging the imposition of colonial rule on their lives" (2007, p. xvii).

This article will provide the following: a discussion of the terms sovereignty, colonialism, and participation in capitalism; a review of some of the Indigenous scholarship that rejects capitalism as a viable system for Indigenous peoples in Canada to participate in; a brief overview of the ACFN community; an examination of how ACFN demands "rights and resources from the liberal democratic settler-state while also challenging the imposition of colonial rule;" and a concluding argument regarding how capitalism can be adapted to

Indigenous worldviews, and how Indigenous worldviews may need to adapt and compromise in the face of capitalism.

SOVEREIGNTY, COLONIALISM, CAPITALISM

In order to ground my contention that participation in capitalism can further First Nations sovereignty and serve an agenda of challenging colonialism, I want to briefly discuss the terms “sovereignty” and “colonialism” in the context of this paper, as well as provide some thoughts on what I mean by “participation in capitalism.”

Bruyneel references Robert Yazzie’s work when he discusses sovereignty, and, in terms of what First Nations are currently facing, I find Yazzie’s simple definition of colonialism also helpful:

Colonialism is a situation in which ... Ottawa ... make[s] decisions that affect the lives of Indigenous peoples without effectively involving them or reaching consensus with them. Postcolonialism will not arrive for Indigenous peoples until they are able to make their own decisions. (2000, p. 46)

Of course, “Ottawa” could also be Alberta’s capital, Edmonton, or the city where the major energy companies active in Alberta are headquartered, Calgary, and so on. The only other alteration I would make to Yazzie’s statement is that it is not only Indigenous people’s “lives” that the colonial powers’ decisions affect, but also their land, a crucial point for most Indigenous peoples, and especially the community of ACFN. Building from Yazzie, Bruyneel defines sovereignty as: “the ability of a group of people to make decisions and control their own lives in relation to the space where they reside and/or that they envision as their own” (2007, p. 23), or, in essence, the opposite of colonialism. These definitions are simple, but I consider them both adequate and useful in the context of this article.

Capitalism is defined by the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* as follows:

an economic system characterized by private or corporate ownership of capital goods, by investments that are determined by private decision, and by prices, production, and the distribution of goods that are determined mainly by competition in a free market

Nearly every national economy in the world is capitalist to one extent or another and capitalism is a key feature of liberal democracies, Canada, of course, included. In my mind, capitalism is an inescapable global reality, even as it faces considerable criticism from various and varied ideological corners. The important point I want to make about participation in capitalism is that I do not see it as an “either/or” proposition. In fact, capitalism’s most ardent defenders would probably argue that “pure” capitalism is not practised anywhere, so in reality all capitalist systems are “more” or “less” capitalist, and a community’s participation in capitalism can likewise be modified or tempered.

The fact that capitalism is globally prevalent and firmly established in Canada, and the point that the extent to which a community participates in capitalism can be seen along a continuum, rather than “either/or,” are important for setting up my argument that outright rejecting participation in capitalism by First Nations may be a hasty, ill-thought through move.

REJECTIONS OF CAPITALISM

Rejection of capitalism among Indigenous academics appears to be widespread,¹ but a full literature review is clearly impossible in an article of this size; instead I will limit myself to three examples that I feel are adequately representative of Indigenous scholarship in Canada that calls on Indigenous people to reject capitalism: Howard Adams, D'Arcy Vermette, and Glen Coulthard.

Howard Adams was a Metis intellectual and political activist who taught education and Native American Studies at the University of Saskatchewan and University of California (Laliberte, n.d.). In *Prison of Grass* Adams argued that "oppression of the native people is so deeply rooted in the capitalist system that it cannot be completely eliminated without eliminating capitalism itself" (1989, pp. 176–177).

D'Arcy Vermette is a Metis lawyer and professor of Native Studies at the University of Alberta, and formerly the Director of the Native Studies Programme at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick. In a short article Vermette states:

Ideology is important because our actions depend both upon how we view our place in the world and how others view our place in the world. And, in a world where equality continues to be limited to sameness, Aboriginal peoples will be victims of colonialist ideologies ... Once one realizes that "economic equality" operates largely on the presumption that Aboriginal peoples are ... marauding capitalists (and the corresponding realization that Aboriginal cultures are not capitalist cultures) the idea of equality is quickly shattered. Any initiatives that reach out to Aboriginal peoples in this way do so at the expense of Aboriginal ways of life. To pretend that Aboriginal peoples "make the choice" to crossover to capitalism is perhaps one of the more common self-serving lines of rhetoric employed through capitalist ideology. When your own ways of life are actively suffocated, what "choice" is to be made? (2012, p. 18)

Finally, Glen Coulthard, professor in the First Nations Studies program at the University of British Columbia, offers "five theses on Indigenous resurgence and decolonization" (2014, p. 165) in his book *Red Skin, White Masks*. His second thesis is "Capitalism, No More!" (2014, p. 170) and his anti-capitalist words are perhaps the most blunt of all: "For Indigenous peoples to live, capitalism must die" (2014, p. 173).

The claims of these three scholars are bold, and clear. They rightfully recognize the connection between settler colonialism (at least how it has played out in Canada) and capitalism. Moreover, they effectively argue that capitalism's values have not traditionally been those of Indigenous peoples in Canada, and that there are considerable inconsistencies between capitalism and Indigenous peoples' traditional economies and way of life. These points are difficult to argue with. Of course, other arguments could be added to these Indigenous ones: income inequality, climate change, and corporate fraud are just three serious issues that have been blamed on capitalism the world over. These criticisms seem to have grown in intensity in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, but there have always been and likely always will be critics of capitalism, including those that call for its rejection and replacement. The fact is that most people can find something to criticize about the way capitalism operates in our world, whether they are Indigenous or otherwise.

¹ Interestingly, my sense is that Indigenous studies scholarship seems to either take it for granted that Indigenous peoples should either participate in capitalism or else reject it forcefully, ignoring the possibility of middle ground.

Despite the thrust of my article, I am in fact very sympathetic with critiques of capitalism, particularly those that are sensitive to the environmental and social consequences it has had on our world and societies. When I consider the capitalism/colonialism alliance, I am all the more wary of taking a position “defending” participation in a system that frankly has so much “evil” associated with it.

Ultimately, though, I do not believe rejecting capitalism is a realistic choice for all, or even most, or perhaps any, Indigenous peoples in Canada. It is so deeply entrenched globally and in Canada that I think First Nations have to be open to participating in capitalism, but in a way that furthers their sovereignty. Clearly, participation in capitalism too often results in *reduced* Indigenous sovereignty, and is frequently yet another form of colonization/assimilation (Castro-Rea and Altamirano-Jiménez, 2008). Too often it is true that “Indigenous peoples ... face an excruciating dilemma: choose between self-determination and market-oriented development and always risk ending up with neither” (Castro-Rea and Altamirano-Jiménez, 2008, p. 246). I do not think, however, that this always has to be the case, as I believe the example of ACFN demonstrates.

ATHABASCA CHIPEWYAN FIRST NATION

Prior to examining how ACFN participates in capitalism, a bit of an introduction to the community is in order.² ACFN, a Chipewyan/Dene community of approximately 1,200 people, is a signatory of Treaty 8 and has taken reserves around Lake Athabasca and the northern portion of the Athabasca River and Delta. In addition to the ACFN reserves, the region is also home to Mikisew Cree First Nation, the hamlet of Fort Chipewyan, and Wood Buffalo National Park. Almost all of the region’s permanent residents are Indigenous.

Only about one third of ACFN’s membership lives on the ACFN reserves or in Fort Chipewyan, with many others living in or around Fort McMurray and Fort Mackay, the epicentre of Canada’s oil sands activity. These communities are roughly 200–300 kilometres south, or upstream, along the Athabasca River from Lake Athabasca, which means ACFN is downstream from oil sands activity. Despite its geographic proximity to the oil sands and Fort McMurray and Fort Mackay, ACFN is a fly- or boat-in community during the summer, and only accessible by road in the winter once the river freezes and an ice road can be established. Although geographically isolated, ACFN stands out among First Nations in Alberta as especially engaged and influential, including economically. ACFN members enjoy a high employment rate compared to other First Nations. Much of this employment is in the oil sands industry, either directly or indirectly, including community members who live in Fort Chipewyan and commute to work by air.

² Unless otherwise noted, the information in this section is derived from the author’s personal knowledge and the ACFN website, www.acfn.com. For a similar but more thorough review of Fort Chipewyan and its First Nations communities, particularly Mikisew Cree First Nation, see Gabrielle Slowey, 2008, pp. 1–5.

ACFN DEMANDS “RESOURCES FROM THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC SETTLER-STATE”

Most significantly for the purposes of this article, ACFN is the owner of Acden, a Fort McMurray-based oil sands industry support services corporation. Acden employs over 3,000 people, and holds 18 subsidiary companies, which are involved in various support services, including: aviation, facilities management, manufacturing, and waste management and recycling. Two of Acden’s major customers are the oil sands giants Suncor and Syncrude. As a private company, Acden’s financial information is not publicly available, but based on its rapid growth and other indicators, it is evident that Acden is highly successful, obviously providing significant employment opportunities to ACFN members and others, and generating significant income for ACFN.

Looking through the lens of Bruyneel’s work, I see Acden as ACFN’s way of “demanding rights and resources from the liberal democratic settler-state.” By participating in capitalism, ACFN and its members are benefiting from the Canadian economic system in ways many Canadians do. This does not mean, however, that ACFN’s participation in capitalism is not tempered by its values and worldview. Two examples of how Acden has incorporated ACFN’s values, include the fact that its headquarters is a building “33.5% more energy efficient” than a standard building, and its “Better Earth Program,” which is motivated by “the environmental stewardship efforts of our ownership, the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation” (Acden, n.d.). Ultimately, though, Acden probably has more in common with other capitalist entities than it does with traditional Chipewyan/Dene ways of life.

ACFN “CHALLENGES THE IMPOSITION OF COLONIAL RULE”

To complete Bruyneel’s observation, ACFN manages to “challenge the imposition of colonial rule” in significant ways, only two of which will be discussed here. First, ACFN is one of only a small percentage of First Nations in Canada which refuses to sign a funding agreement with the federal government. Funding agreements are the mechanism through which First Nations receive federal government dollars for services such as education, capital projects, infrastructure maintenance, social programs, and so on. In some cases, the funding that flows from these agreements represents 100% of a First Nation’s revenue. The funding agreements do not, however, just contain the amount of money a First Nation will receive; they also include obligations on the First Nation to remain “compliant.” Compliance involves heavy reporting burdens; meeting what are frequently very stringent conditions on how funding can be spent; and the requirement of submitting annual audited financial statements and schedules of remuneration of elected and unelected senior officials to the federal government, which are publicized in condensed form. ACFN Chief Allan Adam explained to CBC news in 2014: “We refuse to take funding from the federal government because of the laws and everything that comes with it” (Sterritt, 2014). By refusing to sign a funding agreement, ACFN is protecting its sovereignty and challenging the imposition of colonial rule, even as it gives up financial resources.

Second, in the face of significant environmental degradation of their territory (McLachlan, 2014), ACFN has been relentless in its fight against the oil sands industry. This fight is often conducted in partnership with other First Nations and other environmentally

conscious groups, but ACFN stands out as a leader. ACFN's fight is conducted on multiple fronts, which I will divide into two categories: "attention-grabbing" and "political/legal action."

In terms of fighting that falls into the attention-grabbing category, it only makes sense to start with ACFN's exceptionally savvy media engagement. Although their population is smaller than most First Nations in Alberta, their prominence in media coverage, often including quotes from Chief Adam or ACFN's communications representative, Eriel Deranger, is extraordinary. For example, a search for "Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation" on the website "Newspapers Canada" brought up 6,640 results, compared to 5,520 for ACFN's much larger neighbour, Mikisew Cree First Nation, and only 693, 773, and 860 for similarly sized Treaty 8 nations (Tallcree First Nation, Woodland Cree First Nation, and Beaver First Nation, respectively). "Eriel Deranger" alone brings up 2,870 hits, and "Allan Adam," 5,310. The vast majority (if not all of these articles) relate to ACFN's fight in defence of its land.

Far flashier than mere newspaper article mentions, however, is ACFN's partnership with celebrities. These include actor Leonardo DiCaprio, movie director Darren Aronofsky, actress Darryl Hannah (Dinshaw, 2015), and, most prominently, musician Neil Young, whose "Honour the Treaties" tour helped ACFN raise funds for its fight (Walker, 2014).

Perhaps even more indicative of ACFN's success raising awareness of its fight is an anecdote from the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network's (APTN) National News. On December 8, 2015, several young (seemingly ill-prepared and poorly informed) activists in Quebec, some 4,000 kilometres away from ACFN, chained themselves to existing Enbridge pipeline infrastructure in protest of Enbridge's Line 9 pipeline project, which was then going through the application process. An APTN reporter interviewed one of the activists, who spoke about being "in solidarity with Indigenous peoples;" he named only one community by name: ACFN.

In terms of fights that fall into the category of political/legal action, ACFN has kept its lawyers busy with challenges to, for example: Alberta's Aboriginal consultation system (*Vancouver Observer*, 2015); consultation by Shell regarding its Jackpine oil sands project (APTN National News, 2013); and the *First Nations Financial Transparency Act* (Morin, 2015). Examples of political action ACFN has taken includes: involvement with "Idle No More" (Pedwell, 2013); organized rallies and protests (Theobald, 2015); and participation in Alberta's Joint Oil Sands Monitoring (which ACFN pulled out of when the program lacked "meaningful input from [A]boriginals") (Canadian Press, 2014).

ACFN's success in its fight against environmental degradation of its territory has been mixed. Obviously, significant oil sands extraction activity continues, and the pace of environmental damage does not seem to have lessened. On the other hand, further development and expansion of the oil sands industry has slowed considerably. Certainly this is somewhat due to economic conditions which ACFN has had no control over, but it cannot be denied that ACFN's fight has had influence over things such as the pace of pipeline application approval, and even the (perhaps temporary) denial of at least one major pipeline project, the Keystone XL in 2015. Moreover, the uncertain economic environment ACFN has helped create in Alberta causes industry to move slower and more cautiously. In any case, regardless of the efficacy of their efforts, ACFN's fight in defence of the environment and their traditional lands is another way ACFN challenges the imposition of colonial rule and furthers its sovereignty.

IN DEFENCE OF INDIGENOUS PARTICIPATION IN CAPITALISM

The preceding has demonstrated that ACFN manages to both participate in capitalism (“demanding rights and resources from the liberal democratic settler-state”) and further its sovereignty (“challenging the imposition of colonial rule”). But I want to make an additional point: ACFN could not challenge the imposition of colonial rule in the two ways I have outlined if it was not also demanding rights and resources from liberal democratic settler-state. Or stated in obverse, ACFN’s participation in capitalism is what enables it to further its sovereignty. I make this argument because refusing to sign a funding agreement with the federal government and fighting a media-savvy, resource-intensive campaign against environmental destruction require significant economic resources — resources the vast majority of First Nations in Canada lack. It is through Acden and generally high employment level of its members that affords ACFN the opportunity to reject federal money and fund environmental fights.

A final point I want to make is regarding the relationship between participation in capitalism and Indigenous worldviews. Despite the case of ACFN I have outlined above, I am not willing to suggest that First Nations can participate in capitalism in ways that are entirely consistent with their worldviews, as much as I wish this was the case. On the other hand, as I have noted previously, I do think the degree to which participation in capitalism involves embracing capitalist ideals can vary, and I have noted above just a couple of simple ways ACFN’s participation in capitalism through Acden has been tempered by their values. I know many more examples of this type of tempered participation in capitalism by Indigenous (and other) peoples could be found worldwide.³ In other words, I do not think that First Nations should capitulate to capitalism’s worst characteristics or entirely abandon their values to embrace capitalistic ones. I strongly believe there is room to adapt participation in capitalism so that it can be done in ways closer to Indigenous worldviews.

But, ultimately, no matter how much capitalism can be tempered by Indigenous values, I recognize that Indigenous participation in capitalism will likely require a compromise of Indigenous worldviews. Which leads me to this question: how can I, someone sensitive to the significance of worldview, recommend that Indigenous peoples adapt their worldviews to those of the colonizer?

My answer has two components. First, because I strongly believe capitalism in Canada is inevitable, and that rejecting it is futile. Second, because I think it is reasonable to expect that worldviews adapt and compromise and evolve in the face of changing realities, whether they be colonial realities or otherwise. Very few people (if any) manage to go through life making choices entirely consistent with their worldviews, just as societies’ worldviews change and adapt with time. This tragically has to be all the more true in the fight against colonialism; to quote Franz Fanon:

The struggle [for] ... sovereignty ... itself in its development and in its internal progression sends culture along *different* paths and traces out *entirely new ones* for it. The struggle for freedom does not give back to the national culture its former value and

³ Coulthard himself talks about one interesting proposal by the Dene Nation and Metis Association of the NWT called *Public Government for the People of the North* which included an economic vision that was a bold attempt to balance capitalist and Indigenous principles (2014, pp. 73–75). The proposal was rejected by the federal government.

shapes; this struggle ... cannot leave intact either the form or content of the people's culture. After the conflict there is not only the disappearance of the colonizer but also the disappearance of the colonized man. (1963, pp. 245–246)

For me, then, Indigenous participation in capitalism should involve both an attempt to temper capitalism's most egregious conflicts with Indigenous values, even as it requires a compromising or adaptation of Indigenous worldviews.

CONCLUSION

This article has defended an assumption regarding First Nations participation in capitalism, by using Bruyneel's idea of Indigenous peoples working within a third space to both demand "rights and resources from the liberal democratic settler-state," and challenge "the imposition of colonial rule." While there are no doubt cases of First Nations refusing to participate in capitalism, and other cases of First Nations embracing capitalism wholeheartedly to the detriment of their values and worldviews, Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation provides an example of how Indigenous participation in capitalism need not be inconsistent with furthered sovereignty, nor require complete abandonment of Indigenous values.

My contention is that participation in capitalism should be seen as a valid option for First Nations. Realistic alternatives to participation in capitalism are at best limited, and may be nonexistent. Rather, investment should be made in adapting capitalism to fit Indigenous values, even as Indigenous worldviews may need to adapt in the face of capitalist realities. In order to facilitate this process, settler entities looking to form economic relationships with First Nation should be sensitive to conflicts in worldview between settlers and Indigenous peoples, including settler corporations and Indigenous shareholders, partners, employees, etc. Settler entities should be willing to adapt and negotiate with these tensions in mind. An economic relationship negotiated and developed with worldview differences in mind should result in a relationship that is better for all parties. Ultimately, First Nations participation in capitalism can result in sovereignty being furthered and colonialism being resisted in ways ACFN has only begun to demonstrate.

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