

Redefining Progress

An Indigenous View of Industrialization and Consumption in North America

Rethink your geography a little bit, set aside your thinking, and try to think about North America from an indigenous perspective. In doing so, what I'd like to ask is that you think about it in terms of islands in a continent.

I live on one island, White Earth reservation. It's thirty-six miles by thirty-six miles. It's a rather medium-sized reservation, as they go in North America. That's one island. A little bit west of me is Pine Ridge, a slightly larger reservation. Rosebud. Blackfeet. Crow. Cheyenne. Navaho. Hopi. Some of the larger islands are further north. When you go north of the fiftieth parallel in Canada, which is somewhere a little north of Edmonton, you'll find that the majority of the population is native. 85% of the people who live north of the fiftieth parallel in Canada are native people.

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SPRING 1997

How that is perhaps best reflected is in a place called Northwest Territories. Northwest Territories, a couple of years ago, was split into two territories. One of those territories is now called Nunavut because the people who live there are Inuit. They are the people who are the political representatives. They are the administrators of the school boards. They are the firemen. They are the doctors, the physicians. They have a form of self-governance in Nunavut where the majority of decisions are made by Inuit people. That area, Nunavut, is, including land and water, five times the size of Texas. It is a large area of land. It is the size of the Indian sub-continent.

So perhaps for that reason alone, it is important to know something more about indigenous people. For while we are not part of most American thinking, we are very much a part of this land that is America. We are in fact very much a part of the Western Hemisphere and the rest of the world. The reality is that indigenous people are not just people on reservations in the U.S. and Canada. We are, for instance, the majority population in countries like Guatemala and Bolivia. 80% or more of the people there are indigenous people. Aymara, Quiche, and Mayan people. In Ecuador, 40% of the population and 40% of the land is legally titled to indigenous people. Throughout the Western Hemisphere indigenous people represent a significant portion of the population in many countries. Indigenous people are not all brown or red-skinned people.

On a worldwide scale, it is said there are 5,000 nations of indigenous people; 500,000,000 indigenous people in the world; 5,000 nations. These nations have existed for thousands of years as nations. We share under international law the recognition as nations in that we have common language, common territory, governing institutions, economic institutions and history, all indicators under international law of nations of people. Yet the reality is that on an international scale most decisions are not made by nations and people. Instead they are made by states. There are about 170 states that are members of the United Nations. Most of those states have existed only since World War II.

I would actually suggest to you that most decisions in the world are not, in fact, made by either nations or states, but are instead made by the 47 multinational corporations whose annual incomes are larger than many countries in the world. That is who I would suggest makes most decisions in the world, and who I believe are the root of the problems we face today in the world, as indigenous peoples specifically and all people collectively.

Indigenous vs. Industrial Thinking

I want to talk about the discussion of what is indigenous thinking and what is industrial thinking and the implications of that for where we are today. It is my experience that not only do most people know little about indigenous peoples, but

most people do not know much about indigenous thinking. What I will tell you is that indigenous peoples have our own intellectual traditions, our own cultural traditions, our own scientific medical traditions that are our own and which have existed for thousands of years. However, we are not viewed as having the same kind of intellectual property or intellectual foundations as European culture.

Having said that, let me talk a little bit about indigenous thinking, because I believe that is fundamental for understanding the conflicts that exist in the world today. In the world today it is not a conflict so much between the left and right, or the communists and the capitalists, so much as it is the conflict between the indigenous and the industrial. It is my experience that most indigenous communities view natural law as pre-eminent. It is the highest law, higher than the laws made by nations, states, or municipalities. Natural law is the highest law. As such, one would do well to live in accordance with natural law. Most ceremony, much cultural practice in our communities, is about the restoration of balance and living in accordance with natural law. Because it is our view that in order to sustain oneself as a society, one should live in accordance with natural law, instead of trying to transform nature to live in accordance with your laws.

How do we know what is natural law in our communities? There are two primary sources of our knowledge. The first source of our knowledge is spiritual practice. Indigenous peoples'

spiritual practice—prayer, fasting, vision quest, ceremony or dream—those are all sources of our knowledge of what is indigenous natural law. That is our foundation. That is why it is absolutely essential to support indigenous peoples' rights to religious freedom and to protect our sacred sites. That is the wellspring of our instruction as individuals and collectively as societies.

Our second source of knowledge is intergenerational residency. I'll give you an example of that. My children's grandfather is a Cree man named James Small, who lives either on James Bay or on the Harricana River in northern Canada. Right now he's on the Harricana River. It is a river that flows off of James Bay on what is called the Quebec area of Canada. I'd call it Euaskee, since the Cree called themselves Euaskee, which means "land" in their language. Since they have lived there for thousands of years, I would say it is probably not Quebec or Ontario. It is in fact Euaskee. James Small is on the same trap line that his great-great-great-great-grandparents were on. The same place where they have lived for all those generations. A few years ago I was up goose hunting with James in the spring. He said to me, Winona, you know the martins are migrating west. You all know what a martin is? Furry animal. I think it is related to a mink.

"Martins are migrating west."

I said, "What do you mean, the martins are migrating west?"

"They migrate west once every seventy years."

Who knows the martins migrate west once every seventy years? The only people who know martins migrate west up on James Bay, except for all of you now, are Crees. There is no person with a Ph.D who has gone up there for 210 years or 280 years to figure out how many times the martins migrate and what their rotation is. That is something that only Crees know. That is intergenerational residency. That is the foundation of traditional ecological knowledge, which is knowledge contained by people who live in the same place for that long. That is valid intellectual scientific resource management and biological knowledge.

In fact, I would suggest to you that James Small, who only went to school until the eighth grade, knows more about the James Bay ecosystem than anyone with a Ph.D. from a southern university. Because he has lived there for that long and he has all that body of knowledge which was transferred down to him. That is the source of our knowledge of what is natural law, those kinds of experience and those kinds of practices.

What is natural law in our experience? There are no ten commandments of natural law. What I will tell you is that our experience tells us that natural law is cyclical. All that is natural is cyclical. That is why in most Indian cultural practices you will hear the saying, "What comes around, goes around." What you will hear is that our view is always about the circle, the sacred hoop. That is our practice. That is our belief. In fact, in most of our cultural practices we look out and we

see that all that is natural is cyclical: the tides, the moons, the seasons, our bodies themselves are cyclical. In most indigenous worldviews, time itself is cyclical.

Our most fundamental concept is that you always take only what you need and you leave the rest. To not do so, we believe, would be disrespectful. We believe it would be a violation of natural law.

Those are some basic tenets of indigenous thinking. I present them to you because I believe that indigenous thinking, value systems, and traditional knowledge are as valid as any other form of knowledge taught in this society. I believe that we deserve a place at the table. I also present them to you to contrast them with what I call industrial thinking. I do that because industrial thinking has come to permeate this culture. Industrial thinking does not have to do with a state of mind. Perhaps the best word to describe industrial thinking is in fact a Lakota word that describes white people.

Washichu—He Who Steals Fat

The first time the Lakota ever saw a white person, as the story was told me, he was starving. He came into their camp on the prairie in the middle of the night and started looking around for some food. They all just watched. They were really astonished by what they were witnessing. They watched this guy. He goes in there, gets down in their food, grabs something and runs away. So then they go see what he took. He took the fat.

So the Lakota word for white person is *washichu*, which means, He Who Steals Fat. That's what I call industrial thinking.

It is my experience in industrial thinking that instead of viewing natural law as pre-eminent, we are taught of man's dominion over nature. The god-given right of man to all that is around him, all of which has value only in terms of its utilitarian benefit to man. So, for instance, the argument, "Does a tree have standing?" is an unusual argument in this society. Because we are taught in general that man has superior rights to all that is around him. Within this context, we have coined a phrase in the indigenous community. It actually came from a friend of ours, Jerry Mander, who talked about the "commodification of the sacred." What has happened is that over time, all that is alive, has spirit, or has standing on its own in an indigenous worldview is now viewed only in terms of its utilitarian benefit to man.

I am arguing over clear-cutting on my reservation. I'm trying to keep trees standing, and Becker County is trying to cut them down. I go down there and I have meeting after meeting with the Department of Natural Resources down there. I sit in the meetings with these five guys and they refer to my forest as "timber resources." I do not refer to my forest as timber resources. I refer to them as forests. They are not timber resources. They are forests. That is the difference between an animate noun and an inanimate noun. The Hopi or the Navaho people will tell you, for

instance, that Black Mesa coal field is the liver of Mother Earth. Arizona Public Service will tell you that it is worth \$20-a-ton delivered. That is the difference between something which is alive and something which is viewed in terms of its utilitarian benefit to man. The commodification of the sacred. I believe that has occurred in this society.

Defining Progress

A third concept is that of linear thinking. You all go through it. The best example is how we are taught time in this society. We are taught time largely on a timeline. Usually that timeline, as you all know, begins around 1492 and continues from there on out with some dates that are of some importance to someone. That is a linear concept of time. I would suggest that there are certain values associated with that concept of time. For instance, the idea of progress. Progress as defined by indicators like "economic growth" and "technological advancement."

I would suggest that there are other concepts or values that go along with that. For instance, the idea of the wild and the cultivated. This U.S.-America is based on a pastoral view that came from Europe. So when this U.S.-American worldview looks at the north, it thinks of barren Arctic tundra. That is how we are taught. It has no utilitarian benefit, unless it is brought under the mine, or brought into clear-cutting. When U.S.-Americans first looked west, they saw the

great frontier, the great expanse. Some of it was called the great wasteland. Some of it was called the wilds. It was a god-given right of U.S.-Americans, in the conceptual framework of Manifest Destiny, to cultivate it. Those concepts, I suggest to you, carry with them a set of values. They view those of us who lived in the wilds as savage or primitive, and people who live elsewhere as civilized. I suggest that those are values which permeate education in this society. That is why indigenous intellectual traditions are not presented in most universities. Or if they are presented, in my experience, quite often they are presented by white scholars and not by indigenous people themselves.

I also suggest that [the European pastoral view] is fundamentally racist. Because it is my experience that most people who are viewed as primitive are people of color and people who are viewed in general as civilized are people of European descent. I would on that basis alone suggest that the concept is racist.

Capitalism & Natural Law

A last concept which is U.S.-American—a *washichu* concept—is that of capitalism itself. We are taught in U.S.-America that capitalism is a God-given right. I believe we are taught that it is a dominant economic institution which exists in the world. I will tell you that in many parts of the world capitalism does not exist. Many communities continue in their own economic systems, which are independent. Yet now, with the passage

of international legislation like GATT or the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), many communities are going to be brought under the hammer of capitalism. The impact of capitalism on our communities has historically been devastating. I will ask you to consider that the contextual framework, the actual framework for capitalism itself, makes one need to consider both the permanence and the structure of capitalism as we embrace our future. In my experience in economics class, capitalism is taking labor, capital, and resources and putting them together for the purpose of accumulation, right? That is the basic formula of capitalism. You take labor, capital, and resources and you put them together for the purpose of accumulation.

A successful capitalist puts together the least to accumulate the most. That's how it works. So sometimes you get cheap goods someplace, and you bring them in. Sometimes you get a maquiladora. You hire your workers down there on the Mexican border. You don't have to pay them more than forty cents an hour. That's pretty good. Sometimes you get your trees free from the federal government. Those are formulas for successful capitalism in the 1990s. There are different formulas that have existed prior to this. Slavery, of course, being one of the most apparent examples. The reality is that the structure of capitalism, however you look at it, is inherently about putting together those pieces for the purpose of accumulation. So in its structure capitalism is inherently about taking more than you need and

not leaving the rest. As such, capitalism is inherently out of order with natural law.

The conflict between industrial and indigenous thinking has been manifest in terms of holocaust. That is the reality. It is not abstract. In the past five hundred years, the holocaust which has occurred in the Americas is unparalleled in the world. That is the reality. There are over 2,000 nations of indigenous peoples who have become extinct, and in the past 150 years there has been an extinction of more species than since the Ice Age. There is, from our perspective, and the perspective of many, a direct relationship between extinction of people and extinction of species. That is also the impact of the conflict between two different societies.

The problem, however, is that this holocaust is not recognized as having occurred. It is trivialized and minimized, whether it has to do with human beings or not. That is very much the reality. In my experience, we do not discuss holocaust in U.S.-American textbooks. U.S.-American textbooks do not talk about the U.S.-American experience of indigenous peoples as an experience of holocaust or genocide. Instead, it is largely whitewashed and covered over as something which was inevitable with progress. That is very similar to the treatment of most animals which have become extinct in the Western Hemisphere and elsewhere in the world. It is social Darwinism, and Darwinism is presented as the cause of the extinction. I do not think the buf-

falo was exterminated by Darwinism.

The impact of holocaust on our peoples is something which cannot be trivialized or minimized. Yet in this U.S.-America what has happened is that we do not discuss holocaust as having occurred, which is why U.S.-America is predicated on the denial of the native.

When people think of native people in this country today, when I ask people what kind of Indians they know, in my experience, having done this a number of times, they can usually name Indians from Westerns. That is the kind of Indian people they can name, largely because the image of a native person that exists today in U.S.-America is an image created on television. That is why the native experience is trivialized, and that is why the native experience is romanticized. We are not viewed as human beings as such. Instead we are viewed as caricatures. We exist in cartoons. We are people that you dress up as on Halloween, and we are people used as mascots for sports teams. That is how we become trivialized and do not exist as full human beings with full human rights.

By What Right?

Almost all atomic weapons which have been detonated in the world have been detonated on the lands of indigenous people. I was in China when France chose to detonate its atomic weapons in Muroroa in September of this year. What gives France a right to a French Polynesia? Why do they have a

right to detonate an atomic weapon in the Pacific? The irony of the situation is that under international law, because France detonated an atomic weapon in land which they said was theirs, or in waters which they said were theirs, there is no legal recourse for the people who live in the Pacific. I have to ask what right they have to a French Polynesia.

The international situation is mirrored in North America. The single largest hydroelectric project in North America? Cree lands. James Bay 1. We have the dubious honor of having a hundred separate proposals to dump toxic waste in our communities, sixteen different proposals to dump nuclear waste. That has much to do with environmental racism and environmental justice issues. Poor Indian communities have no environmental regulations. It is ironic, I think, that Indian tribes are viewed as sovereign if they want a casino, or a nuclear or toxic waste dump, but not if they want to protect their groundwater or their air quality. That is the irony of the relationship that we have with the federal government.

So to deny that holocaust existed historically or presently is to deny the reality of the situation. It is incumbent upon people to understand the graveness of the international environmental and economic crisis, to recognize the situation in which indigenous peoples find them/ourselves, and to recognize collectively the situation in which we all find ourselves.

We are communities that have fought for generations to retain that which is ours, that which is different. We have

resisted assimilation and said, We will not be the same. We will not be part of this. We will be different, because that is who we are. There are some things to be learned from the tenacity of struggle. I think that we should be given some credit, and I urge you to support us in our struggles for indigenous self-determination. I say that because in supporting us you support cultural diversity, and cultural diversity is as essential to the web of life as biological diversity. It is about our humanity, individually and collectively. I think it is important that I can pray in my language and have a ceremony in my language. That is the beauty of life, and to lose that beauty is to lose something which is very great in this society, very great in this world. Part of supporting indigenous people is supporting our rights to self-determination. Our rights to a land base.

Fair Representation

Let's look at national and international law. Why is it that we do not have a voice at the U.N.? I ask you to consider who makes decisions in the world and what rights they should have. Why is AT&T's right superior to mine? What right does Weyerhaeuser have that supersedes my right to my land, to my trees? That is the fundamental question which should be asked, not only by indigenous people, but by anyone who lives in a community impacted by a corporation from somewhere else. What gives them a right which is superior to my rights, whether it

is the right to dump chlorine and dioxin in my water, to dump PCBs, or to clearcut a forest? I ask you to consider broader constructs of where we need to be going.

I think it is time to get past the discussion of if it's the left or the right. I think that we need to talk about a totally different view. I think that we have that right and we need to look at that right. It is like being offered a pie of a certain flavor. What indigenous people are saying, what people of color are saying is, "We don't want the pie. We want a totally different pie." We need to think larger. Instead of asking questions like, "Do we need economic expansion here?" or "Do we need gender equity here?" I think we need to ask fundamental questions.

I have major concerns about the re-industrialization of regions. I think we should talk about deindustrialization of regions. I think instead of talking about agricultural expansion which requires fertilizers and chemicals and high levels of machinery, we should talk about simpler agriculture, which is organic, where you know and can pronounce the names on the label. What a concept.

Instead of always talking about centralizing energy production, let's talk about decentralizing energy production. I have spent my entire life dealing with the predator. The predator is the energy industry. I fought a nuclear waste dump on my reservation. Then I went to my kids' homeland and fought a dam. I go down there and visit my friends at Navajo, and they've got a uranium plant. The predator moves from place to place. We need to confront

the level of consumption which exists if we're going to deal with our human rights.

Questioning "Gender Equity"

We need to question the paradigm of gender equity as women. I oppose gender equity. I oppose the concept of gender equality. Why do I oppose it? Because in my experience "gender equity" largely means that white women replace white men in the seats of power. That is my experience. It does not deal with fundamental questions of race, sexual orientation, class, geography, or privilege. What good will it do the women of Zimbabwe if white women are the heads of corporations in the U.S.? Instead of gender equity, I support the rights to self-determination of all peoples, and women are peoples. So my right to live on my land is as equal to someone who lives here's right to live in their area. My right should be as equal. We are equal regardless of our level of privilege, level of education, or whether we have blue, silk, or no collars. Those are the questions. I support the rights of self-determination of all women, whatever country, whatever sexual orientation, in whatever location we find ourselves.

Addressing the Roots

Finally, most fundamentally, I ask you to consider that the long-term issues of indigenous people's rights to self-determination and women's rights to self-determination—our collective ability to survive—has very much

to do with addressing fundamental systematic issues in this society.

It is perhaps best said by a friend of mine. His name is Father Roy Bourgeois. The first time I met him was at an Exxon stockholders meeting in Chicago. It was in the early 1980s. It was in the Chicago Opera House. It was all dark and fancy. There were all these women with feather boas and fur coats and these men with grey suits and fur coats. They were the stockholders of Exxon. Down on the stage there was this Exxon banner hanging from the sky and these five little white guys who I assume were the board of directors. For those of you who have never been to a stockholders meeting, it's an interesting exercise. I went there because we had a stockholders resolution. We were trying to change Exxon, a difficult corporation to change. Some people had gone in there, some anti-nuclear activists, to get Exxon to divest of their nuclear holdings. They were kind of hippies. They stood up there and all the stockholders kind of looked at them and didn't know really what to make of them. Then they sat down. Then these nuns stood up. Nuns are very good with stockholders resolutions. These nuns wanted Exxon to get out of South Africa. This was in the middle of the anti-Apartheid movement, when divestiture was one of the main strategies we used to support the people of South Africa's right to self-determination.

So the nuns got up and talked about Exxon's investments in South Africa and how that was really bad and they

should really divest and they have all these little votes there. So you could see them all kind of looking down while the nuns were talking. Then they looked up. Then I got up and talked about Exxon's 400,000-acre lease at Navaho reservation. Illegal under federal law, but they got an exemption from the Secretary of the Interior for a lease. I don't know if you know how big that is. It's half the size of my reservation. It's a really big lease for as much uranium exploration as they want to do. So we're trying to get Exxon to get out of that uranium lease as being unethical. So I got up and testified.

Then I sat down and this priest stood up. He went up to the microphone, which was in the aisle. He stood up and said, "I don't got a resolution. I got a question. I've been living in Latin America for the past ten years, and the people there asked me a question to ask you. They want to know if there's a direct relationship between their poverty and your wealth."

That's all he said. But that, my friends, is the essence of the discussion. We need to curb our level of consumption in this society. A society which consumes a third of the world's resources is living way beyond natural law. A society which consumes that much is a society which causes extinction of peoples and species. I do not believe that a society which causes this level of extinction of peoples and species is sustainable. I think our challenge collectively is to address those fundamental issue of consumption in the society if we are going to figure out now to bring our society back in order with natural law.

Our challenge is to figure out how to make a more cyclical economic system. That is natural law. We need a system in which we do not consistently output waste, where we feed back in, whether through recycling, re-use, or co-generation. In my cultural practice we believe that is possible. In my language, there is no concept of Armageddon, something which exists, I believe, in this society. We don't believe that there's an end. We believe instead *mino bimaatisiwin*: cyclical system, continuous

rebirth. That's what that means. There is a cycle. There is a change. And there is rebirth. That, I believe is the challenge that we collectively face.

This was adapted from a speech given on November 13, 1995 at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, NC; Recorded by David Barsamian for Alternative Radio]

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"Emergence of the Clowns," by Roxanne Swentzell, a sculptor from northern New Mexico, is a clay representation of the Pueblo origin story in which the sacred clowns, or *kosharis* emerge from the inner earth and lead the people to the surface. The four *kosharis* symbolize the four directions—the four seasons, the sunrise, noon, evening, and night phases of the day, and the four stages of life—childhood, youth, adulthood and old age.