

*Walking the Green Path:
Why Socialism Can't Save Us and How Indigenized
Economics Will*

Aimée L. Cree Dunn

Many progressives argue that the solution to our social and environmental ills is to replace our capitalistic economy with a socialistic one. Keeping the discourse confined to a choice between capitalism or socialism, however, locks us into the urban-industrial model, and prevents our questioning the basic assumptions of Western thought that have caused today's massive social, cultural, and environmental destruction in the first place. The Green Movement was founded on support for a radically different cultural alternative. We need to return to our Green roots and re-examine the most radical economic vision of all – that of Indigenous economics.

In Indigenous economics the world consists of a complex web of relationships between sentient beings. People “see themselves living in the world and in a relationship to the world in which not only does the world nurture them, but they have a reciprocal obligation to nurture it . . . it's the most *moral* relationship with nature that humans ever devised . . . a cultural, spiritual, social exchange that's intended to go on for generations.”[i] [ii] In contrast, both capitalism *and socialism* view the world as consisting of “resources” that must be industrially exploited for a successful economy.

Industrial Colonization of Land and People

An industrially-based economic system requires extracting raw

materials from the Earth for industry. The only lands left today with these “resources” are traditional Indigenous territories and other rural-wilderness lands. Thus, in order for either a socialist or capitalist economy to thrive, these lands are colonized for industry.

Industrial economics accomplishes this colonization through the seizure of Indigenous lands and the creation of structural poverty in rural-wilderness areas. Formerly self-sufficient people of the land are forced into a cash-dependency. Cash-dependency expands industrialism: it creates acceptance of environmentally destructive mines, factories and similar sources of wage-work. It also facilitates the emigration of rural populations to urban areas for wage-work. Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, for example, typifies this. A beautiful, cash-poor, rural region, it’s an industrial colony where mining and logging industries compete with tourism. Many youth there feel they only have three choices in life. It’s known as The Three Ms: Move to the cities, work for the Mines, or go into the Military.

Both capitalist and socialist governments remove people from their self-sufficient relationships with the land. This allows for the industrial exploitation of the rural-wild land for its “natural resources” which disrupts, often destroying, traditional self-sufficient lifestyles lived on the land. [iii] Finland offers a characteristic example. In 2016 the socialist government of Finland passed the Forestry Act threatening “over 5.4 million acres of water systems and nearly 900,000 acres of forest in Europe’s only pristine forests, while opening the door to further exploitation.” The Indigenous Sami opposed the act, saying it would threaten their homeland and traditional reindeer herding lifestyle. According to Jouri Lukkari (President - Finnish Section of the Saami Council), however, there are “few opportunities to

influence the decision making over our lands.”[iv]

The Western Ideology of Progress and Human Supremacy

Since they developed from traditional Western culture, the canons of both socialist and capitalist thought uphold the basic Western ideologies of “progress” and human superiority. In the basic tenets of capitalism and socialism, self-sufficient small-scale societies are part of humankind’s past and are not relevant to the present. In this linear model, the most recently developed societies (industrial civilizations) are more advanced and knowledgeable than the ancient small-scale societies with millennia of experience on their side. Socialism and capitalism see the remaining tribal societies as remnants of some ignorant past, not models for the future.

While some individual socialists question aspects of the Western superiority complex, and while some argue for locally rooted decentralized economies, the foundations of socialism are deeply rooted in the Western concepts of progress and human supremacism.

For Karl Marx, human societies inevitably pass through various stages of advancement beginning with “primitive” tribal cultures and “advancing” ultimately to the urban classless society of socialism. The land is seen as the location of resources to be exploited and converted into manufactured goods (how convenient for Marx, then, to view tribes as backward and inconsequential).[v] Rural life, too, Marx considered an “idiocy.”[vi] He envisioned all the countryside being developed into one extensive town.

Marx was not concerned about the industrial exploitation of the Earth, the protection of all our relations, nor the destruction of

traditional Indigenous economies. Rather, the problem Marx saw was one of transferring power over the means of industrial production to the workers in order to facilitate justice *through worker-owned industrial exploitation*. Marx advocated for “the bringing into cultivation of waste lands,” the “[e]stablishment of industrial armies,” and the “[c]ombination of education with industrial production.”^[vii]

As industrialization thrives on urbanization, neither capitalism nor socialism questions urban growth. Yet urbanization is the oldest known form of colonization. As Theodore Roszak writes, ‘the industrial city aspires to absorb all the factors of production into its ownership and control, and perfects their economic rationalization. It takes over the land itself.’^[viii] Food, water, lumber, metals, the production and transfer of electrical power, oil and gas and its infrastructure . . . all of these and more are required to sustain urban dwellers. And these “resources,” of course, come mostly from the colonization of rural-wilderness lands. As their land is colonized, so too are the people of the land.

This colonization of the rural and the wild by urban industrial empires is part of what Lewis Mumford calls “authoritarian technics.”^[ix] Authoritarian technics is technology that’s dependent on systems of authority to obtain the resources necessary for its manufacture and sale. For example, if we “need” oil and gas for our lifestyles, we set up rigs and run pipelines, regardless of whether or not the people who live in the area want those things. If the people resist, military forces are brought in. Socialism and capitalism both depend on these systems of authoritarian technics to function.

How, then, is socialism the “radical alternative” we need in

today's world?

Simply put, it isn't.

An Overview of Indigenous Economics

According to anthropologists, only one human adaptive strategy has a long term successful track record: small-scale Indigenous societies (or tribes). These modes of cultural thought represent the only radical and effective solution to today's multi-faceted crisis. Further, they have the only economic systems that match Green values. Caught in the web of Western industrial culture, neither socialism nor capitalism delve deeply enough into root causes to be considered Green.

While specific traditional Indigenous customs around the world are different, certain core values are held in common:

1. Respect for individual freedom and recognition of individual responsibility for our actions
2. Responsibility to the human community
3. Responsibility to the non-human community (all our relations)
4. The belief that we belong to the land, the land does not belong to us
5. The principles of what the Haudenosaunee call "The Honorable Harvest."

The first three principles are guided by the teaching that we're all part of the Great Mystery of Life, and, as such, each individual is

given the inner guidance to choose the right path. True power lies, not with authoritarian structures, but within us and stems from our direct relationship with the land and all relations.

In the urban-industrial structures of capitalism and socialism, we're disconnected from the land and give away our power to the authorities in charge, resulting in a diminished capacity to look out for our communities. Thus, the task we're charged with in revitalizing Indigenous economic life is to reclaim our true power so we can exercise it to provide for our human and non-human communities to the best of our abilities. In recognizing our responsibility to *all* our relations, we understand that all lives are interconnected and interdependent. While the taking of life (be it animal or vegetative) is necessary to sustain life, it must be done with infinite respect and gratitude.

The knowledge that the land doesn't belong to us, we belong to the land, has major economic implications. It's no longer merely a "resource" we can exploit as we please. The land is a larger entity of which we are an interdependent part, sharing it with our other relations. The land is the overarching power. Our role is to live responsibly within that realm.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Potawatomi botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer, describes the Haudenosaunee concept of the Honorable Harvest, explaining, "the fundamental principles are nearly universal among peoples who live close to the land":

Introduce yourself. Be accountable as the one who comes asking for life.

Ask permission before taking. Abide by the answer.

Never take the first. Never take the last.

Take only what you need.

Never take more than half. Leave some for others.

Harvest in a way that minimizes harm.

Use it respectfully. Never waste what you have taken.

Share.

Give thanks for what you have been given.

Give a gift, in reciprocity for what you have taken.

Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever.[\[x\]](#)

These are essential tenets to a sustainable economics, yet neither socialism nor capitalism includes them in their organizational philosophies.

What Is Pragmatic?

For those within the Western paradigm, the Honorable Harvest seems entirely impractical. But what is practical? Exploitation to the point of destroying the world as we know it? Annihilating species at a rate greater than anything since the mass extinction of dinosaurs? Cancer epidemics in industrialized countries?

Or is it more practical to sustain life? To take only that which is given, only that which is needed?

Survival is the most practical strategy of all. To implement this strategy, we must return to an economics in which we ask permission of the deer, the maple, the meadow, the river. From this viewpoint, it is Western economic systems that are impractical – neither socialism nor capitalism are based on a realistic understanding of the world. As AIM activist John Trudell said, such Western thought systems are “industrially insane.”[\[xi\]](#)

A World Based on Indigenous Economics

Indigenizing the economy doesn't mean we'll all be hunter-gatherers again; we're simply too overpopulated to accommodate such a lifestyle. How, then, do we develop a form of economics for today's world that is built on the foundations of traditional Indigenous economic systems?

First, our solutions cannot involve authoritarian technics; thus cliché solutions such as mega-wind and solar projects may buy us time (although also doing damage), but won't work in the long run. We may, in fact, need to look at surviving without electrical power in almost all walks of life except where it's most necessary.

Second, recognizing limits is inherent to neither capitalism nor socialism, *but recognizing that we have limits is essential to the continuation of human and other life*. We need to recognize we're limited in our ability to produce and consume products. The land is limited in how many humans it can be expected to support. Neither capitalism nor socialism recognizes such limits. An Indigenized economics would.

Third, we need to reexamine our urban areas and reintegrate them into the community of the land. They must stop colonizing rural-wild areas and instead learn to live within the carrying capacity of their immediate bioregions. Rooftop gardens, intra-city forests, locally produced energy . . . we must make our cities a sustainable part of the surrounding landscape so they cease colonizing rural-wilderness areas.

Fourth, we need to begin the process of rewilding our homelands, people and communities. Our disconnect from the land has led to a false belief in our own god-like powers and to innumerable ecological mistakes. In rewilding ourselves we reconnect and relearn what it means to have a relationship over generations to a

particular land and our relations who live there as well. Without this, people won't understand how to participate in the economics of life.

Anishinaabe activist Walt Bresette felt that only when people became indigenous to place could we begin to grow a sustainable society.^[xii] To do this, Bresette said, people need to commit themselves to the land in which they live, connect with its millennial history, and sink their roots deeply into that land.^[xiii]

Teachings from the Anishinaabeg, an Indigenous nation from the Great Lakes area, tell us that now is the time of the Seventh Fire. In this time, according to these teachings, all of society must choose between the Burnt Path of industrialism or the Green Path of Mother Earth. To walk the Green Path, the revitalization of the old ways is essential and connections with all our relations must be re-established.

Choosing either capitalism or socialism keeps us on the Burnt Path of industrialism, authoritarian technics, and the destruction of Earth as we know it. But there is a time-tested alternative. We can decide to listen to those old teachings from which many divorced themselves so long ago. We can choose to walk in the footsteps of our ancestors, following the Green Path, bringing their teachings into the modern world.

Pull Quotes

“We need to return to our Green roots and re-examine the most radical economic vision of all – that of Indigenous economics.”

“Caught in the web of Western industrial culture, neither

socialism nor capitalism delve deeply enough into root causes to be considered Green

We need to begin the process of rewilding our homelands, people and communities.

“[N]either socialism nor capitalism are based on a realistic understanding of the world. As AIM activist John Trudell said, such Western thought systems are ‘industrially insane.’”

“[R]ecognizing limits is inherent to neither capitalism nor socialism, *but recognizing that we have limits is essential to the continuation of human and other life.*”

[i] Mohawk, John. “Subsistence and Materialism.” *Paradigm Wars: Indigenous Peoples’ Resistance to Globalization*. Ed. Jerry Mander and Victoria Tauli-Corpuz. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006. p27.

[ii] Seneca philosopher, John Mohawk, may differ with the use of the term Indigenous “economics.” For him, what we are discussing “isn’t an economic exchange. It’s a cultural, spiritual, social exchange that’s intended to go on for generations” (ibid). However, in this essay I don’t confine the definition of economics to transmission of wealth (as it is often defined) but rather to the original idea of economics: the means by which households interact with their world and with each other (i.e. household management).

[iii] See Bodley, John. *Victims of Progress*. 6th ed. Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 2015.

- [iv] Sami Indigenous People Face Unprecedented Land Grab in Finland.” <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Sami-Indigenous-People-Face-Unprecedented-Land-Grab-in-Finland-20160403-0030.html>.
- [v] Marx, Karl. *The Communist Manifesto. A World of Ideas*. Ed. Lee A. Jacobus. NY: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2002.
- [vi] IBID p226.
- [vii] IBID p240.
- [viii] Dunn, Aimee. *Worldeaters: An Ecosophical Critique of Western Industrial Civilization in Selected Novels of Linda Hogan and Ursula K. LeGuin*. <http://seventhfireproject.blogspot.com/>.
- [ix] See Jensen, Derrick. *The Myth of Human Supremacy*. NY: Seven Stories Press, 2016.
- [x] Wall Kimmerer, Robin. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Press, 2013. p180, 183.
- [xi] Rae, Heather. *Trudell*. Passion River: 2007.
- [xii] “Walt Bresette on Becoming Indigenous to Place.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4Vtzj5LwUU>. From Walt Bresette. *Speaking for the Generations*. <http://www.protecttheearth.org>.
- [xiii] IBID.