Learning, land and resistance in Canada – reflections on First Nations

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Introduction

I am a non-aboriginal researcher living in Ontario, Canada. I do not propose to represent an Indigenous perspective, but rather seek to recognize the history of colonization, dispossession and displacement and perhaps most importantly, resistance to these historical experiences among First Nations people, as of utmost importance to all interested in meaningful critical education in Canada. I will be speaking about First Nations issues and questions of land as they relate to learning, but more precisely about the relations within which these lessons about learning take place in Canada. I speak from a place of ‘alliance building’ – one that seeks relations of reciprocity between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal people as we mutually seek ways forward out of the quagmire that advanced capitalism and its adherents has brought upon us – from environmental disaster, systematic war and displacement, deepening exploitation of labour and the co-modification of nearly all aspects of life. I intend to add to the voices of dissent, towards the creation of alternatives that prioritize critical learning and pedagogy based on a dialectical-historical materialist understanding of reality.

This paper is therefore as much about learning related to a First Nations context as it is about learning generally. Learning for real transformation must account for the material realities of those who have survived colonization and who experience marginalization maintained through the social relations of capital. We must discover ways of countering the pervasive displacing and alienating patterns by which we all find ourselves handcuffed, but from which an increasingly few prosper. It is in the spirit of fostering learning to counter dominant forms of education that wittingly or not reinforce the existing exploitative equation, that this paper is written.

First Nations and the dialectical relationship

Perhaps the best place to start is by recognizing that First Nations people in Canada have faced a history of marginalization, exclusion and displacement since contact, an historical event that brought capitalist relations to Canada. Colonization wreaked havoc on once freely migratory first people, leaving a legacy of what many have called genocide – be it cultural, physical or some of both. The remaining discontent and continued resistance to the imposition of Euro-Canadian nation-state and large-scale development interests is evidenced through such acts of resistance that have become well-known in Canada: Oka, Ipperwash, Grassy Narrows and more recently the Caledonia protest as well as the incarceration of the Chief and Council Members of Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug in Northern Ontario, who were jailed for opposing mining activities on their traditional territory.

Marx’s notion of the dialectical relationship about refers to the labour-capital relationship where opposites make up the relation. The positive side, the owners of capital, (‘positive’ since they benefit from the relation) depends on the negative side (labour) whose efforts continually enrich the positive, also dependent on the positive. Not until the premise upon which the relationship itself is based is transformed can the ‘negative’ really change
(Allman, 1999). In the meantime, the lop-sided relationship between labour and capital will continually reinforce itself.

The labour-capital relationship was promoted through Church and state, although can be understood as somewhat distinct for First Nations communities who have maintained a degree of territorial and political autonomy and as Indigenous collective rights have been legally recognized, at least on paper. While the labour-capital relationship has wreaked havoc on First Nations people throughout Canada, entrenching the ‘negative’ side of the capitalist relation with new influxes of large-scale development, important spaces for conceptualizing alternatives to the dialectical labour-capital relationship persist, given many First Nations maintain land rights struggles, as under attack as they are. The relationship between First Nation people and their traditional territories is one based on countless centuries of learning about economic and cultural practice, passed down through generations (Little Bear, 2000; Battiste, 2000). Thus the collective struggles of Indigenous people - recognized to some extent within Canadian Law and to lesser extent in practice - while bound in many ways by the same historical capitalist process that is experienced world-over, also offer insights for conceptualizing alternatives to the labour-capital relationship. If we can better understand the dialectical relationship, and the historical ‘material’ lived experience of people who maintain collective identities within a territory such as those where First Nations people reside, critical learning can be directed towards the transformation of antagonistic capitalist relations which have been established historically yet are not unchangeable, as those who benefit from it would have us believe.

**Primitive accumulation and learning**

It is helpful to return to Marx’s basic concept of primitive accumulation, in order to understand the current situation facing First Nations people and others who struggle to maintain a degree of self-sustaining life practice, not fully subsumed by the capitalist mode of being. Marx’s concept of ‘primitive accumulation of capital’ refers to a process whereby the owners of capital forcibly displace people from their lands and productive processes, either through legislation, violence and cohesion or other hegemonic means, and turn people into wage earners (Meiksens-Wood, 1999). This process has neither been ‘inevitable’ nor ‘natural’ but was born in feudal England and was spread worldwide, advancing to new complex stages of articulation at each step. It is via capitalist modes of being that the creation of surplus value takes precedence over all else. Capitalism came to the Americas with colonization; slave labour was utilized and later low-waged labour, forcibly uprooting African and Indigenous people from their original territories. It was never fully completed and in Canada, battles continue to be waged within this terrain on all fronts – cultural, economic, legislative, and not least of all, within the media and other ideological spaces. The battle is over a way of being in time and space, with other people and in relation to nature.

Resistance to primitive accumulation and dispossession is at the root of meaningful learning in the current era of advanced capitalism offering crucial sites for gaining a deeper understanding the social relations of capital in non- or less-abstracted ways. Such sites present possibilities for individual learning to be tied to a collective process for transformation rather than binding learning to individual ‘self-advancement’, a cornerstone of education within capitalist relations. While individual advancement is not detrimental in theory, when it is detached from broader concepts of collective struggle for transformation it generates competition among individuals and a race for the best ‘piece of pie’, that in reality becomes the ‘race-to-the-bottom’ given ever-fewer people can access the pie. In contrast, when learning is tied to the material conditions experienced within history, to the protection and enhancement of territorial and cultural integrity, and subsequently to a
broader political project that contests capitalism’s exploitative goals, learning takes on new meanings that present tangible steps towards addressing marginalization, exclusion and displacement.

Ruptures and reassertions of learning

Racist policies in Canada historically led to brutal emotional and physical trauma among First Nations people, and, as documented by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (1996), have included forced attendance at Residential Schools, the creation of reserves and limitations on the ability of Indigenous people to fully exercise cultural and sustenance practices. As Little Bear (2000) and other Indigenous authors assert, these strategies were implemented by both Church and State to dispossess and displace Indigenous people in Canada, having drastic consequences on the traditional forms of education and learning that Indigenous people fostered within their communities. Many First Nations people have confronted an intense process of alienation and dispossession and continue to exercise traditions that link sustenance to spiritual and cultural practices allowing for collective struggle to continue. A key principle is the maintenance of relationships to land not for the creation of surplus and individual profit but rather for collective well-being. Interestingly, Paula Allman (1999) explores Marx’s relational thinking as a much deeper and more meaningful source of learning about the world, in ways that evoke concepts expressed by Indigenous people. She reflects on the problematic way people tend to make sense of the world through categories, but that ‘further understanding will only come from the recognition of the way that in which the members of separate categories are related in the real world’, including relations between people, plants and animals (Allman 1999, pp.63). It is through learning about the inner relationships between these ‘categories’ that meaning is found, something that Indigenous people have taught within their own traditions.

While the current era presents new and complex problems, one thing is clear: when learning that takes place in many Aboriginal communities in Canada is tied to collective concepts of land and an over-arching territorial-cultural project it presents a contestation to capital’s primitive accumulation and dispossession. It is crucial that non-aboriginal people in Canada come to value the territorial struggles faced by aboriginal people as a site for meaningful learning that aims at transforming the dialectical relationship established between the Canadian state and the First peoples of this country. Such learning, related to the struggles faced by other marginalized groups, poses critical challenges to current trends in education, and proposes alternative visions for learning aimed at an integral transformation of the prevailing social relations of capital.

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