ACADEMIA | Letters

Indigenous knowledge is not an extractable resource

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Indigenous knowledge is increasingly being looked to as containing solutions to contemporary challenges, particularly climate change. Along with growing anxieties about the future of the planet is a parallel "tendency to exalt Indigenous or non-Western others as symbols of inspirational environmental ethics, modelling interspecies, interconnectedness and reciprocity contrary to a Western will-to-destruction" (Neale & Vincent, 2017, 426). Recent calls to harness Indigenous bushfire management techniques in Australia and growing interest in Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in land and resource management globally are examples of this trend and represent important steps forward in improved recognition of Indigenous peoples. However, reaching for Indigenous knowledge when western knowledge and systems fail is to treat it as a gap-filler or additive (Starblanket & Stark, 2018, 170). While recognition is good and conversations around partnering with First peoples to resolve macro-problems are a step in the right direction, Indigenous knowledge cannot be treated as an extractable resource to be managed and used apart from the place, people and culture that generated it.

Exatractivism in state-Indigenous relations

"Extractivism" is usually understood in economic terms, specifically in reference to the removal of natural resources from the earth for capital gain. However, extractivism is increasingly being explored as a way of understanding forms of exploitation and subjectification of people in capitalist systems. For instance, labour, arts and cultural knowledge can be treated a resource to be extracted and used for desired ends by the state (Junka-Aiko & Coretes-Severino, 2017, 178). The tourism industry, for example, has long acquired and commercialised Indigenous artwork without concern for intellectual ownership (Gibson, 2001, 1).

Unsurprisingly, this is a common dynamic of state-Indigenous relations around the world. More often than not, state-led engagement strategies with Indigenous peoples have extractive under and overtones in that they are not reciprocal arrangements. Knowledge and practices that

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most align with western ways of thinking are selectively extracted from the place, language and people responsible for their generation, management and sharing, and contained, interpreted and applied within western systems and institutions. This not only perpetuates colonial relations and the oppression of First peoples, but also misapprehends and undermines the dynamism and fluidity of Indigenous ontologies (Simpson, 2004, 380). This dynamic can even be observed at the global level. For example, agroecology, an innovative approach to sustainable farming developed by peasant farmers in Latin America drawing on their traditional knowledge and practices, is being scaled and applied in America and Europe by corporations and organisations. However, in the process it is also being sanitised of the political objectives the farmers are pursuing through agroecology, namely "re-peasantization" - improved community control of land and resources and food sovereignty (Holt-Giménez & Altieri, 2016).

Very rarely does the knowledge shared by Indigenous people benefit them as much as it benefits the state. In fact, engagement with the state usually costs Indigenous peoples, whether in health, community and familial cohesion, culture or self-determination (Simpson, 2016, 24). Even well-intentioned collaboration and participatory approaches (co-management, co-design, consultations etc.) perpetuate asymmetrical power relations and typically are extractive with Indigenous knowledge that is captured, interpreted, managed and applied with state language, systems and processes.

In this way, Indigenous knowledge extraction is part of a broader "paradigm of exploitation" (Junka-Aiko & Coretes-Severino, 2017, 178) that has significant implications for the survival of traditional ontologies and institutions and First Nations' ability to effectively engage these in contemporary political, economic and social spheres.

First peoples have maintained and evolved their own processes and protocols for knowledge generation, management and teaching for thousands of years. Dene scholar Glen Coulthard (2014) explains that Indigenous knowledge and practice is generated from engagement with the land, a reciprocal relationship he refers to as 'grounded normativity': "….land-based practices and longstanding experiential knowledge…inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 12). Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg artist and scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson elaborates: "…grounded normativity is the base of our political systems, economy, and nationhood, and it creates process-centered modes of living that generate profoundly different conceptualizations of nationhood and governmentality – ones that aren't based on enclosure, authoritarian power or hierarchy" (Simpson, 2017, 22). Because of the wholly different ontology that underpins Indigenous knowledge systems, non-indigenous systems lack the tools to both interpret and apply that knowledge.

Writing about Indigenous-state hybrid legal systems in Canada details how western and

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Indigenous legal systems have dramatically different "lifeworlds", or "constitutional order[s] from which they derive life" (Mills, 2016, 847). This means, law or knowledge from one system cannot be enacted or interpreted with the tools of another without cost to its integrity – it cannot be separated from its constitutional context (Mills, 2016, 854). In other words, *how* knowledge is accessed and empowered is as important as *what* knowledge is accessed and empowered.

Indigenous knowledge generation, management and accountability is the right and responsibility of Indigenous peoples (Simpson, 2017, p. 17). If non-Indigenous systems are interested in accessing Indigenous knowledge to help tackle contemporary challenges, then time, authority and resources are needed to support First Nations to reconnect with their land and regenerate the intelligence and governance systems that evolve from that connection (Elliot 2018, 68-69).

Critical traditional system resurrection and deconstructing colonial postures

Critical traditional system resurgence is the act of looking inward and breathing life into traditional systems, institutions and processes. There are innumerable possibilities for the innovation of solutions, drawing on the best of both western and Indigenous knowledge systems, if Indigenous governance and intelligence systems are resurrected and exercised in a contemporary context. However, the only way this can happen is if non-Indigenous systems and institutions yield authority, time and resources, and deconstruct their own colonial postures toward First Nations people.

In order to genuinely partner with Indigenous peoples, the modus operandi approach to working with First Nations must change. In her recent article, *To address the ecological crisis Indigenous peoples need to be restored as custodians of Country,* Barkandjischolar Zena Cumpston argues that "to meaningfully engage First Nations communities' ways of knowing and interacting with Country, they need to cease being 'informants', 'actor', and 'consultants' which, at best, marginally inform ecological and agricultural imperatives" (Cumpston, 2020).

Governments excel at keeping Aboriginal leaders and communities busy with consultations, funding applications, policy development and reporting schedules that prevent communities from attending to their nationhood. Projects and initiatives that recognise, accommodate and protect Indigenous rights go some way, but not far enough to hold space for the resurrection and enactment of traditional systems, institutions and ontologies (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005, p. 599). As long as partnerships with First Nations are structured around state timeframes, processes and modes of operating, they will continue to yield limited outcomes for both parties. First Nations representatives must have a seat at the table from the beginning of the process and be fairly remunerated for the contributions and participation.

The most effective bush fire management in Australia is led by Indigenous fire manage-

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ment experts in Northern Australia where partnering with parks, conservation groups and pastoralists has enabled traditional fire management knowledge to be "reconfigured to combine with western scientific tools and knowledge" (Fisher & Altman, 2020). The blending of knowledge systems through mutually reciprocal partnership has resulted in world renowned, innovative fire management techniques. In Mi'kma'ki (Nova Scotia), Canada, M'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall introduced the principle of *Etuaptmumk* or 'Two-Eyed Seeing' to the science community, which refers to learning from the strengths of both Indigenous and western knowledge, bringing them together – seeing with both eyes - to share the "gift of multiple perspectives". *Etuaptmumk* is increasingly being used to understand whether and how Indigenous knowledge is brought into conversation with western knowledge (Roher et al, 2021).

The work of innovating

Indigenous knowledge cannot be extracted from the place, people and culture responsible for its generation and used to gap-fill failings of western knowledge and systems. Containing, interpreting and applying Indigenous knowledge in western structures is a continuation of colonial practice and undermines the integrity and potency of the knowledge itself. This means, the work of innovating solutions to the most pressing challenges facing our generation relies on governments deconstructing their colonial postures and figuring out how to hold space for First peoples' to resurrect and strengthen their ontologies and governing systems. It is increasing evident that the future of our planet may well depend on it.

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