

TOWARDS AN INDIGENOUS EGOISM



BY CANTE WASTE
(GOOD HEART)

Image based on *Two Ojibwa Indians*
(ca. 1845) by Eugène Delacroix

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Introduction

I am an Indigenous person of the Oglala Lakota nation. My ancestors are from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in western South Dakota. Before then, they were nomadic and travelled freely across the entire area known as the Great Plains. I am also an individualist anarchist and, for better or worse, exist within a radical “community” of other anarchists here in the United States. I have been bombarded with countless write-offs of individualist and egoist thought, calling it capitalist, colonialist, or even white supremacist. I’m writing this particular piece in response to a friend of mine who made the claim that individualism and self-interest are basic tenets of colonization. While this may be true if self-interest is defined by colonial ideology, I will present an individualist and egoist-anarchist thought that is a tool of decolonization and indigenous resistance.

Individualism, Colonialism and Entitlement

What makes individualism and egoism so appealing is the sense of liberty and freedom it offers: the sense that no one else should restrain you from attaining your desires and that you and your desires are important. We are deprived of freedom in every culture and society: we face the coercion to work, to serve the collective, to honour the morality of God and the church, to fear prison and internalize policing, to fulfil social roles, to reproduce the family, to submit to authority, to be a productive contributor to society and humanity. Active pursuit of freedom seems a natural reaction to constraints. European explorers, colonists and settlers were seeking this freedom. They felt entitled to resources and land, which lead to the removal and relocation of Indigenous peoples. They felt entitled to the exploitation of free labour, which lead to the transport and slavery of Africans. It was in their interest to expand the wealth and power of their nation or colony, and disregard the interests of anyone who would be in the way of this. In short, colonization is the acting on behalf of the self-interest of the colonizer.

However, Max Stirner's definition of what constitutes a voluntary egoist offers a different vision of colonial individualism. A colony is a collective that exists to benefit its mother country with natural resources, labour, spread of nationalist and Christian ideologies and culture, and strategic control of land from which to wage war. Everyone who exists within a colony is then existing to serve their country, whether it be workers to extract resources or in factories maintaining production, armies to fend off rival countries and Indigenous peoples, missionaries to spread religion amongst Indigenous nations, or politicians to maintain the order of the colony's population. The thirteen colonies realized their lack of freedom from Britain, and initiated the American Revolution, created the Declaration of "Independence," and the creation of the United States of America. The United States is founded on an illusion of freedom, liberty and individualism. This has always been a central marker of American national ideology. But a delusional mass that continues to serve and submit to various authorities are not voluntary egoists, but rather, in Stirner's words, involuntary egoists. A patriotic soldier may join the military and fight his country's enemy in his self-interest, but in doing so, he is submitting to his commanding officer, to the politicians who decided to go to war, to the duty to obey orders, and to his devotion to Country. He is giving up his freedom as an individual and serving a collective: his idea of a "greater good". He is giving up the ability to become his full Self. The same can be applied to the religious man who serves God in self-interest, to attain salvation and avoid eternal suffering in his imagined Hell. He represses many aspects of himself to conform to his idea, or his church's idea of God and morality. Every man who fought in the American Revolution and every person who has immigrated to America – for freedom, for individualism, for the American dream – has been chasing individualism, which can never truly be achieved by servitude.

The History of American Colonialism and Indigenous People

Colonial individualism and entitlement were achieved at the expense of Indigenous peoples. In order for these explorers, colonists, and settlers to expand and have access to what would bring them power and wealth, Indigenous people had to be subjugated. In a military sense, this was not an easy task at first, but due to epidemics brought by Europeans, many Indigenous nations were severely weakened or nearly wiped out entirely. This allowed European/American colonizers to gain a military advantage. Forced removal from land followed; any land that held value of any sort was cleared out and exploited by the colonizers, resulting in near extinction of animals and plants that Indigenous people relied on to sustain themselves. Any resistance to removal brought warfare and the individuals who advocated for such things were labelled "savage" and either forcibly civilized or killed. The civilizing was left to missionaries, whereas the killing was the job of the United States and Canadian governments.

Both spiritual and cultural traditions and ceremonies were outlawed. Belongings considered to be sacred were taken away and destroyed. Children were removed from families and sent to boarding schools. Their hair, which held tremendous spiritual meaning, was cut off to resemble whites. They were hit and beaten for speaking their traditional languages. They were converted to Christianity. They were educated as the colonizer saw fit, to be suited to living up to Western cultural standards. Everything was done to exterminate Indigenous culture, in the service of colonialism

Self-Hatred in Modern Day Indigenous Communities

We have survived through a great deal. History has erased us; to most we no longer exist. We are still very much alive, but modern day reservation life is no treat. Colonization's effects still haunt us as a people, often taking subtle forms. Alcoholism, addiction, domestic abuse, economic deprivation, poverty, diabetes and suicide are at high rates on reservations all across North America. Most of these stem from self-hatred, both individual and collective. Is it a coincidence that many of these issues also plague African-American neighborhoods in major cities across the United States? These are the results of colonization, of removing indigenous peoples from the land that they've become accustomed to living with, of forcing them to assimilate to Western civilized cultural standards and a capitalist market economy.

The Colonizer in Our Heads

Aside from the self-hatred I see in fellow Native people, I also witness assimilation and a sense of identification with the colonizer. The remnants of our communities are now run by tribal governments, tribal police, and tribal courts pushing reform and imitating the way that the colonizer runs things in his world. Our youth are encouraged to go to college, get careers, and be successful; or join the army to fight in the United States government's wars to enforce colonialism in other parts of the world. I frequently attend, dance, and sing at powwows across North America, and see crosses and Nike symbols on individuals' dance outfits. It's unheard of for there not to be an American flag carried in at grand entry, followed by a song to honour all Native and non-Native veterans for "protecting our freedom" and "allowing us the privileges to do what we're doing today."



Individualism as a Tenet of Decolonization

It should be evident that when we talk about “self-interest,” we cannot speak of objectivity. What may be in your self-interest could also very well be something that would keep me from something in my self-interest. This makes the blanket statement “self-interest and individualism are a tenet for colonization” a simplistic view of what self-interest is and avoids the question of whose interest it is that we’re talking about. As an Indigenous person who takes a strong stance against assimilation, colonialism, and capitalism, it is certainly not in my interest to maintain those structures.

Individualism is the idea that you and your desires are important. Egoism implies this and also states that one ought to act on behalf of oneself to realize desires. As Indigenous people, what could we use more than self-confidence? We need to know that we as individuals, and as an Indigenous people, matter. For centuries we’ve been beaten down, physically and psychologically. We’ve been oppressed by Power for so long that we’re convinced that we don’t matter, that we’re worthless, that we’re savages: less than human and unfit for society. The psychological effects of colonization have been studied, dissected, and proven to result in both internal and external self-hatred.

Some of us have accepted this; we abuse ourselves and each other. Or we self-medicate to numb ourselves from the pain. Some of us assimilate to be recognized by our oppressors, to feel a sense of self-worth. I for one want to appease to no one. I want to know that I matter to me, not to the society that denies me my desires, keeps me from my freedom: a society responsible for all of the damage done to Indigenous people worldwide. One thing that I do see at powwows all across the continent are bumper stickers and clothing expressing “Native Pride.” This is something that my elders have said since as far back as I can remember. “Be proud of who and what you are.” If we were to take on this pride and understand that we do matter, to us, and start acting in our self-interest, it would mean war against those who stand in our way, who keep us from our freedom.

Egoism Means War On Society

The idea of individualism that the European explorers and colonizers failed to realize was its rejection to duty, devotion and submission. I recognize no authority figure over me, nor do I aspire to any particular ideology. I am not swayed by duty because I owe nothing to anyone. I am devoted to nothing but myself. I subscribe to no civilized standards or set of morals because I recognize no God or religion. No amount of pressure, judgment, or force should cause me to restrain myself from that which I desire. Egoist anarchists have declared war on society, war on civilization. This resistance is in the interest of anyone who desires a life free of submission to a ruling power, to those who dream of a world of freedom, to those who would build

community with those who share common interests and affinity: a world of free association, so we can live as we please and experience a fulfilling life. This should apply to no one more than Indigenous peoples. As the Western civilized culture's standards and values have been forced down our throats, we need to remember who we are. We need to remember the importance of self and our desires.

The rejection of this submission does not come easily. When I say war on society, I mean it. Decolonization can only occur if we confront our enemy: the colonizer. If we don't, then we're only perpetuating the colonizer/colonized relationship. We can never expect the oppressors to give up their privileges for the sake of the oppressed. This initiation and confrontation may necessitate violence. "It should be noted that colonialism was imposed through military force. Ultimately, it is the system's monopoly on the use of violence that enables it to impose its will" (Warrior Magazine).

We have to remember what it means to be a "warrior". We honor our veterans as Native people, to revive the traditions of honoring our warriors; but a true warrior doesn't fight for her enemy, and she doesn't submit to an authority that dominates and subjugates her and her people. A true warrior fights for himself, his family, and his community. Make no mistake: our indigenous ancestors didn't go down without a fight. We remember the Sioux uprising, where a broken promise of food led to attacks on white settlers and theft of food from settlements. Andrew Myrick, a lead trader who said of the broken promise "if they are hungry, let them eat grass," was one of the first killed, found days later with his mouth stuffed with grass.

The history of indigenous resistance began the day Columbus and his men landed and continues today in struggles such as the refusal of the Diné to relocate as strip-mines rip apart their lands and generating plants poison the desert air. I think it's time we stress the importance of Self. I think it's time we brainstorm new strategies and study the history of Indigenous resistance to formulate new paths toward decolonization and the destruction of civilization.

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