
Green Capitalism Won't Save Indigenous Nations or Canadians

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Abstract

The 'greening' of capitalism is marketed as mitigating the drawbacks of historical and contemporary systems of extraction, while simultaneously being pushed as a method through which relationships between Indigenous nations and the state can be reconciled or decolonized. However, this narrative is ignorant of the consumption required for maintenance of the status quo for colonial states and the subservient relationships of Indigenous nations to the dominant economic system. Without major changes in colonial consumption and the relation of Indigenous peoples to planning and power, decolonization and mitigation of climate disaster are doomed to failure.

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The 'greening' of capitalism and its emphasis on stopping or slowing environmental destruction is often promoted as a voluntary, well-meaning choice that seeks to address the ecologically exploitative nature of capitalism. Given that ecologically sustainable values were once central to Indigenous economies, it seems only natural that the processes of *greening* and *decolonizing* economies¹ should find common ground. But is green capitalism truly a choice, and is its supposed extension to Indigenous Nations and their economic activity a decolonizing act consistent with Indigenous land-based values? My answer is "no" in both respects: I argue that green capitalism is a continuation of the *coerced consumption* and *compelled consent* that has long been foundational to Indigenous Nations' economic dealings with settler governments and corporations.

Green capitalism is primarily the phenomenon wherein capitalist ventures, which by general rule seek profit as primary, endeavour to portray themselves in one way or another as environmentally friendly, progressive, or whichever nature-affiliated buzzword is most marketable at a given time (Green & McVeigh, 2022). Secondly, it refers to the wider trend of individualizing and compartmentalizing what environmentally responsible people can do (Kaufman, 2020). Such practices cast a fog over what many companies do both directly, as in the case of Coca-Cola's billions of plastic bottles, and more covertly, as in the case of corporations or ultra-rich individuals funding think tanks or politicians advancing their goals (Tencer, 2012).

Coerced consumption refers to the material and psychological pressures that impact communities and individuals, both Indigenous and settler, to consume items in greater amounts and at greater profit margins while simultaneously sabotaging and disincentivizing ways of life that do not perpetuate the broader consumer culture. Clive Thomas argues the point as

one of underdevelopment and creating dependence on the colonizer by the colonized:

1. The lack of an organic link between domestic resources and domestic demand and
2. the divergence between domestic demand and the needs of the broad majority of the population (p. 59, 1974).

One must ask, despite Canada's repeated rhetorical overtures of reconciliation and 'building together,' how many of said overtures have prioritized the healing of Indigenous lives and cultures at the expense of settlers or the broader settler economy? Or is reconciliation only allowed on colonial terms?

"Compelled consent" refers to consent obtained due to the external factors affecting Indigenous communities and individuals. In such situations, everything from basic biological needs like food and clean water to survival and resurgence of cultural practices is limited by environment, legislation, or settler encroachment. Indigenous communities struggling with high rates of poverty see their people struggling as environmental damage limits the viability of those who live off of and with the land. With the land less bountiful than it has been traditionally, these same communities must find other ways to feed themselves, and this usually comes through entering the colonial economy. Indigenous communities, which have been historically underfunded (Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2013) or denied their treaty entitlements (Lac La Ronge Indian Band, 2023; Government of Canada, 2022), are backed into a corner by the Canadian government and economy: they must either accept its offers of extraction and jobs for their people or watch as the years go by, unable to change anything due to the ongoing issue of perpetual underfunding.

¹ To understand 'decolonizing economies' or what this term should be understood to mean, I defer to Kahnawake Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred: "From an indigenous perspective, appropriate economic development entails taking advantage of opportunities to build self-sufficiency in order to preserve the essence of indigenous cultures and accomplish the goals that emerge from the culture. This is quite different from tying a community to an exploitative economy promoting objectives that contravene traditional values." (p. 139, 2009).

The capitalist system is not the proper place to address the issue of climate change or decolonizing Indigenous economies. This is because capitalism as a system, though there may be individual exceptions, is inherently exploitative and only finds its 'conscience' when it is forced to do so by mass unrest² (Library of Congress) and/or the exercising of state powers³. Green capitalism tends to contrast with traditional capitalism in name and messaging only, but not in function. Rather, 'green' reforms merely dull the still extraordinarily sharp impact of human activity on the environment⁴ (Government of Canada, 2022) and maintain the lack of self-determination of Indigenous Nations that have little or no choice but to participate in this 'greening' process.

Coerced Consumption

The systems of underdevelopment and dependence put in place by colonization contribute to and create dissonance between the historically and culturally informed economic needs and desires of Indigenous peoples (Rodney, 2022). Capitalism's manufacturing of the demands of individuals and groups was evident throughout the fur trade era and continues today with Indigenous people forced to maintain a relationship shaped by what settler colonial capitalism produces and sells, rather than one shaped by internal community needs, values, principles, and relationships to more-than-human relatives (Robin et al., 2021). The 'under-development' of Indigenous Nations is still frequently used as a rallying cry for imposing greater Indigenous dependence on capitalist economies.

In this vein, green capitalism simply seeks to capitalize on an ecological imperative it largely created. Given a choice between a major drop in emissions brought on by reducing actual consumption and a drop brought on by the use of more efficient products and services, which all have to be sold to the customer at a healthy price point, corporations and the governments that support them are clearly choosing the latter. Any 'greening' of capitalism, with or without Indigenous participation, has occurred primarily because of a growing scientific consensus that massive de-escalation of emissions and pollution are necessary to stop or even slow devastating climate consequences (IPCC, 2022). Further, 'green capitalism' expands the capitalist frameworks and value systems into more diverse and (supposedly) environmentally friendly/responsible markets and systems by assigning economic/financial value to animals, plants, humans, and the land, and deriving these values from concrete, market-recognized metrics like the amount of carbon a whale sequesters over its lifetime or the tourism brought in by rare species (Robinson, 2022). As argued above, this focus on what individuals can consume to mitigate emissions distracts from the exponentially more consequential industries and systems contributing to an ongoing, but still worsening climate crisis.

The reformation of the current economy into one that is only less harmful than the status quo avoids the transformative work that could significantly impact emissions or rehabilitate natural environments instead of aiming to reduce emissions and pollution by the barest amount recommended. Indeed, the greatest focus seems to be on what can be done to keep the

² From the Library of Congress page on The Civil Rights Act of 1964: "African Americans gained the formal, if not the practical, right to study alongside their white peers in primary and secondary schools. ... Nonviolent direct action increased during the presidency of John F. Kennedy, beginning with the 1961 Freedom Rides. ... Hundreds of demonstrations erupted in cities and towns across the nation. National and international media coverage of the use of fire hoses and attack dogs against child protesters precipitated a crisis in the Kennedy administration, which it could not ignore. The bombings and riots in Birmingham, Alabama, ... compelled Kennedy to call in federal troops."

³ Abraham Lincoln, responding to Horace Greeley in a letter dated August 22, 1862: "If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that."

⁴ According to the federal government's own numbers, Canada's emissions in 2019 made up 1.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions, despite Canada's population making up 0.4% of the global population at the time. Among the ten highest emitting countries, Canada records the highest GHG emissions/capita.

current system intact. In terms of 'Indigenizing' the environment, this translates into *inclusive* economic reconciliation, which emphasizes representation and diversity amongst economic elites and decision-makers while maintaining the same systems. However, this is not the best path forward. As revolutionary thinkers like Malcolm X have pointed out for decades, "Tokenism is hypocrisy" (1963). Alfred echoes this statement decades later: "We have not fully recovered from colonialism because our leadership has been compromised, and we will remain subject to the intellectual, political, and economic dominance of Western society until the leaders of our communities realize the power of Indigenous philosophies and act to restore respect for traditional wisdom" (p. 47, 2009). If Canada suddenly had an Indigenous Prime Minister and ten Indigenous billionaires, what comfort would that be if the systems that have segregated, disenfranchised, and otherwise oppressed Indigenous peoples throughout Canada's history remain and the impoverished and working poor see no material change? Inclusive economic reconciliation contrasts with the possibility of *transformative* economic reconciliation, a form of reconciliation that would fundamentally disrupt how the larger systems of production, industrialization, infrastructure, and other areas function, ultimately benefiting the masses of Indigenous people, rather than a select few, and better align it with ecologically sustainable processes. As Indigenous revolutionary media The Red Nation argues, "While the focus is rightly placed on that which we are protecting and defending, what if the question all water protectors and land defenders asked was, why don't we just overturn the system that makes development a threat in the first place? This system . . . is capitalism." (p. 21, 2021). The point builds from and transcends the arguments of Alfred. Self-sufficiency is paramount, but if the settler state's economy remains extractive and exploitative, then it will clash perpetually with those Indigenous Nations that divorce themselves from it.

It is difficult for citizens and Indigenous Nations to make their voices heard with respect to economic development. The economy does not exist in a vacuum, separate from culture, politics, religion, and education. Rather, the economy influences and is influenced by each of these, but those with the most

capital can undercut any of the alleged benefits of these interconnections. A 2014 Princeton study indicated no correlation between American public opinion and public policy because the population is corralled by economic elites:

When a majority of citizens disagrees with economic elites or with organized interests, they generally lose. Moreover, because of the strong status quo bias built into the U.S. political system, even when fairly large majorities of Americans favor policy change, they generally do not get it. (Gilens & Page, p. 576)

Imagine if policy could be more readily impacted by those currently dealing with the increasing cost of living (but not those directly benefitting from cost-of-living increases) and those living in poverty, as well as both settler and Indigenous peoples. Until economic policy is truly democratically governed by those most affected, the ability to effect change through the demand of the majority of people will remain stunted, dulled, and deficient of its true revolutionary potential.

Compelled Consent

The general standard for consent given by Indigenous people for development on their territories is that consent should be freely given prior to the start of development, and the populace should be properly informed of likely and possible outcomes for their community and lands. The acronym FPIC often denotes this: free, prior, informed consent. What is not questioned as often is just how free the consent given by Indigenous Nations can be today. Canada often boasts of nation-to-nation reconciliation and upholding Indigenous rights (Department of Justice Canada, 2018), but a colonial monster remains in play, or at the very least in back of mind, for any Indigenous Nations or people who deign to deny the Canadian government its wishes.

The 'free' part of FPIC is meant to ensure that governments will not threaten Indigenous Nations with loss of funding or other possible means of

damaging a community if they decline offers of development. But this view is limited in scope and fails to consider Canada's colonial history. Decades of chronic underfunding of reserves and racism at both institutional and interpersonal levels have left many Indigenous Nations struggling with perpetually high poverty rates, and unemployment, mental health, and addiction issues (Forester, 2023). Can 'free' consent for major projects be considered meaningful if these projects are the *only* paths offered for combatting on-reserve poverty, cultural revitalization, and other immediate concerns? Cases such as the Wet'suwet'en land defenders and the historical Oka crisis—both of which involved firm Indigenous resistance to economic development projects and the withholding of Indigenous consent—were subjected to extreme police and military reprisals as ordered by political and legal authorities (Hume & Walby, 2021). While the Canadian state has become vastly wealthy since Confederation, Indigenous Peoples have had much of their traditional lands seized, when they were not forced completely off them. Where the lands Indigenous Peoples still control have valuable resources, they are forced to bear the brunt of health and safety risks contingent on extraction (Cecco, 2023; Kelly et. al., 2010). Moreover, as the landmark *Delgamuukw v British Columbia* case established, even when Canada's systems 'validate' the pre-colonial governments of Indigenous peoples, they make exceptions wherein they can trespass on these unceded lands. As Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Sean Coulthard argues,

“any residual Aboriginal rights that may have survived the unilateral assertion of Crown sovereignty could be infringed upon by the federal and provincial governments so long as this action could be shown to further “a compelling and substantial legislative objective” that is “consistent with the special fiduciary relationship between the Crown and [A]boriginal peoples.” What substantial objectives might justify infringement? According to the court, virtually any exploitative economic venture, including the “development of agriculture, forestry, mining, and hydroelectric power, the general economic development of the

interior of British Columbia, protection of the environment or endangered species, and the building of infrastructure and the settlement of foreign populations to support those aims.” (p. 41, 2014)

So even in cases where Canada has not a whisper of a legal claim to territories, it still reserves the right to insert itself if such involvement benefits the Canadian economy. When speaking of compelled consent, this is what is meant. Canada does not ask Indigenous Nations which paths they believe would be best to follow; rather, these nations are pushed to a fork in the road and told to choose between an underfunded path which reproduces poverty and a more funded path which puts them at immediate risk from extraction-related pollution and health risks, and even undermining traditional relationships with the land.

Language Is Changing; Industry and Government Are Not

As more people become aware of both negative environmental effects caused by industry and negative developmental effects on Indigenous Nations by government, it becomes untenable to speak about the same extractive and contaminative processes in the ways industrialists and politicians have grown accustomed. The options in front of these decision-makers are as follows: 1. Accept the time for systemic change has arrived (and lose massive amounts of capital in the transition), 2. Wholly deny any possibility of compromise (and risk political & revolutionary violence), and 3. Rhetorically support a transition while materially maintaining the same exploitative status quo. One need only look at global and national events to understand that option three has been chosen. Internationally, 18 of 20 sponsors for the 27th United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 27) partnered with or supported the fossil fuel industry (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2022). In the domestic sphere, federal and provincial governments have made statements which claim their goal is to respect and reaffirm their

relationships with the Indigenous people and nations across its claimed territories. However, these same governments continue to draft, pass, and enact legislation without meaningful consultation with Indigenous communities (Warick, 2022) or ignore calls to action which would affect settler and industrial property (Indigenous Watchdog, 2023).

Why is option three chosen? The settler state and fossil fuel companies would prefer the relationships remain unaltered from their historical and highly profitable forms. However, green capitalism and lip service to reconciliation alter the degree of exploitation and/or change the perception of it. What it cannot do though, is change in kind. If the owner of a factory sees their workers unionizing and fears the possibility of the seizure of their entire factory by these workers, they generally accept raising workers' wages when faced with such stark alternatives. The owner would prefer to maximize profits, and a history of strike-breaking and union-busting (Kelly, 2020) points to such owners' use of myriad tactics, but the art of concessions allows them to prolong their stay in power and wealth. This is why modern 'treaties' affirm Indigenous Nations' subjugation to Canadian governments rather than concretizing nation-to-nation relationships. As Alfred (2001) pointed out with the British Columbia Treaty Process, "indigenous nations must surrender their independent political existence and ownership of their lands to Canada." Rather than being included in developing the plans which Canada and its provinces must use moving forward, Canada offers Indigenous Nations chances to serve the wider Canadian and international communities through land use both less intensive (as in solar farms at Cowessess First Nation) (CBC News) and more environmentally destructive (as in oil sands extraction and mining processes which use incredibly potent toxic materials).

To look more in-depth at a specific example where capitalism is driving only minor reform, we can examine Canadian and American attempts to "green" the car economy. While electric vehicles do not produce emissions, the energy created to fill up charging stations must come from a variety of sources, including oil, gas, and coal (Hensley, Knupfer & Pinner, 2018; Canada Energy Regulator, 2022). As North American infrastructures are retooled to

accommodate more electric vehicles, not enough serious thought is going into to how this will affect Indigenous Nations, both rural and close to population centres. A total moratorium on oil production would leave many in more remote areas, like the Arctic, at a loss for transportation options, as batteries lose much of their efficacy at low temperatures. Nevertheless, continued extraction represents a perpetual threat to health and home for many Indigenous peoples near oil sites. This threat is why Canada must plan and develop energy infrastructures in concert with Indigenous Nations, as they will likely be most affected by the implementation of these policies. This approach can include drastically reducing the general population's need for oil through mass transit infrastructure (The Red Nation, 2021) while maintaining low production levels for those communities where the locations or population make access to such transit untenable. Most importantly, the Indigenous Nations have a sovereign right to decide how, when, and by whom their land is used.

Further to consultation around changes to the car economy, government support for Canadian extraction companies, where "almost half of the world's publicly listed mining and mining exploration companies" are headquartered (Natural Resources Canada, 2023), continues the domination of Indigenous people at home, and globally (Engler, 2021). Minerals like lithium are essential to any 'greening' of the Canadian economy, but to obtain it in sufficient volumes, people like the Atacamas must let extraction companies use their lands for what are essentially pennies on the dollar. In what is one of the driest places on Earth, "[e]xtracting one tonne of lithium carbonate requires 2m litres of brine, which is added to the fresh water used during the purification process." (Fernandez, 2021).

In terms of decolonizing economies, half-measures like turning the nation's personal vehicles electric and allowing increased Indigenous access to the financial and business domains do not address core contradictions within the Canadian state between Indigenous Nations and settler Canadians because they do not offer a meaningful recognition of sovereignty for Indigenous Nations at home or abroad. Rather, they act as an avenue for them to be

(less) marginalized within the Canadian economy. With respect to 'greening' the economy, the focus is on making minor concessions through facilitating Indigenous investor and entrepreneurial access to capital markets or further imposing on Indigenous lands by mining for the rare minerals needed to produce electric car batteries (Greenfield, 2022; Owen et al., 2023).

Conclusion

If 'green capitalism' can indeed meet the challenges of emissions slashing and revitalizing Indigenous sovereignty – and I believe that I have presented ample reason to doubt its potential in this regard – discussions concerning the exact amount of energy that settler Canadians require, rather than simply desire, are necessary. Discussions, agreements, and planning for the energy and resources Indigenous Nations require to sustain and develop their quality of life and culture (“quality of life” rather than “economic prospects” is an important distinction) are necessary. These problems need to be confronted and solved thoughtfully by both Indigenous and settler entities, such as the Assembly of First Nations, federal, provincial, and municipal governments, grassroots Indigenous organizations, and the like.

The capitalist system currently enjoys hegemonic support and control in Canada. However, as this article and many others have argued, this support is not organic; it is coerced. The consumption patterns of Indigenous people and settlers alike are greatly influenced by what those with power – both political and capitalist – steer us toward and even what they make available and unavailable. As Canada stares down the barrel of continued climate emergencies, and settlers face a perpetual ‘us vs them’ framing regarding Indigenous rights and sovereignty, it is time to remember who bears the responsibility. Because it will not be the rich, ‘white’ capitalists bearing the brunt of these disasters. These troubles, both economic and environmental, will continue to fall on the bodies of Indigenous people the world over, of Black people in the United States and Canada, and of entire populations in countries most at risk from extreme weather.

If the goal is to avoid the kinds of compelled consent described in this article, the process must start today, if not sooner. More specifically, getting Indigenous Nations in the consultation and planning rooms starts now. These plans must be developed in consultation with, and in service of, Indigenous people. What is necessary for Indigenous people, the settler state, and the overall climate, is a transformation of the relationships of the last few centuries. These relationships are not only between settler and Indigenous humans, but also between humans and more-than-human relatives.

The answer in transforming relations though, must not be found in Indigenous Nations working within the dominant framework pushed by Canada, but by Indigenous Nations leading discussions on what they need, ignoring economic constraints. This imperative for Indigenous-led discussions speaks to the aspirations of Alfred and The Red Nation as quoted in this paper. Decolonizing the economy must be informed most by those who understand what their communities need to survive and thrive. Once these goals are set, it is up to the experts, the Elders, and the builders, to establish what is possible, what is feasible. The survival and resurgence of Indigenous Nations and the global environment must not be limited by what capitalist economists believe and argue. Despite many arguments to the contrary in the public consciousness, money is not the primary limiting factor in this global moment. The only concrete limits are how many people can work towards these goals and what materials exist to work toward their completion (Kelton, 2021). There is no reason to believe that solutions outside of capitalist ideology are incapable of addressing Indigenous resurgence. Canada can work to revolutionize how it and its people live right now, or it can do so in 50 or 100 years. Whether the ideas and actions are big or small is not important, it is about what moves Canada and the Indigenous Nations it claims to the goal. If the goal is 10,000 miles away, then there is no use complaining that it is too far and saying you will only walk 100 or 5,000 miles. Know the goal and how to get there, then follow that plan until it the goal reached. A Canada living by its nation-to-nation promises is worth untold miles.

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