

Rethinking reconciliation: Problematizing reconciliation politics through the Land Back lens

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many to stay home, including Indigenous land defenders who must self-isolate, even as resource extraction is deemed an “essential service.” The Coastal GasLink (CGL) pipeline, being built in northern British Columbia through Wet’suwet’en territory, is one of those “essential” projects. It is carrying on “business as usual” but with the added benefit of local protestors being forced to stay home while national attention is diverted elsewhere (Wood, 2020).

THE WET’SUWET’EN CASE

The CGL pipeline originally sparked national conversation in January 2019, when an injunction was granted to CGL to access a road being blocked by Wet’suwet’en protestors, and 14 people were arrested by the RCMP (Fournier, 2019). The pipeline, part of the “largest private sector investment in Canadian history,” was again discussed at length in late 2019 and early 2020, as access to Wet’suwet’en territory remained blocked to pipeline workers, and protests erupted across the country in solidarity (Bellrichard, 2020). More injunctions, arrests, and protests followed, this time with renewed force by the RCMP in a pre-dawn raid, including “lethal overwatch” (Crosby, 2020). National attention drove the federal and provincial governments to the negotiation table with the hereditary chiefs, and a memorandum of understanding was signed in May 2020, recognizing Wet’suwet’en title to the land but not resolving the future of the pipeline (Wood, 2020). These protests were (and are) a response not only to Wet’suwet’en law (as the hereditary chiefs did not give consent), but also to Canadian law (with Wet’suwet’en title being recognized by the Supreme Court) and international law (as

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the province has adopted UNDRIP, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples).

The Wet’suwet’en protests, both in the territory and across Canada, acted as a catalyst for wider conversations around what reconciliation actually means, especially when the Canadian state does not listen when Indigenous nations say no. Protestors answered this question, taking up statements such as “Reconciliation Is Dead” and “Land Back” (Talaga, 2020). Indigenous-led actions have increasingly been using “Land Back” language, not so much as an organized movement but as a unifying narrative, connecting similar fights across Canada for land and treaty rights, rather than relying on “reconciliation” to frame their efforts.

WHAT DOES THIS SHIFT MEAN?

If reconciliation is no longer the way that Indigenous communities are framing their relationships with governments and settlers—if Indigenous communities are now emphasizing the return of “Indigenous lands to Indigenous hands”—this signals the failure of reconciliation to adequately address Indigenous needs. The Canadian state’s conceptualization of reconciliation has relied and continues to rely on methods of capitalist expansion and development to extend the benefits that most Canadians receive to Indigen-

ous people as well. However, this framework simply represents more of the same. Capitalism and resource extraction have served as key foundations of settler colonialism in Canada and are therefore the problem. Consequently, this framework cannot also be the solution.

One does not have to look too hard to find myriad examples of how economic expansion has been the pillar of the formation of the Canadian state, from the fur trade and Hudson’s Bay Company to continuing natural resource extraction. One also does not have to look too hard to see how land is central to the continuing colonization. If colonialism is about people and place, as Wolfe (2006) suggests, the Canadian approach has been and continues to be to oppress the “people” in order to gain access to their “place.”

These current forms of reconciliation politics are therefore less about building a new relationship with Indigenous nations, where economic development benefits all those involved, than about replicating the colonial practices that marginalized Indigenous peoples in the first place. The process may appear different, but the outcome remains the same. Indigenous voices and sovereignty are ignored, and the state can profit from Indigenous resources without consent. Trying to address the marginalization of Indigenous people caused by colonial policies through more extraction is an attempt to address the symptoms of Canadian colonialism rather than the causes, and therefore only reproduces more of the same. This is a song we have all heard before. By moving away from reconciliation politics and using the language of Land Back, Indigenous activists are demanding a change in the lyrics.

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WET'SUWET'EN IS EMBLEMATIC OF THE BIGGER PICTURE OF RECONCILIATION

Wet'suwet'en is emblematic of how reconciliation politics have been framed as a new relationship but, in reality, serve to replicate the colonial one. The rights and title of the Wet'suwet'en nation over their territory should have been absolute, as they are affirmed in Canadian and international law. Yet, when it comes to resource development and the economy, Canada can ignore all of that in favour of the "national interest." It is no wonder that Indigenous land defenders have abandoned reconciliation politics, because it represents a "shape-shifting colonialism": on the surface, reconciliation looks different from colonization, but underneath, the same structures of control are maintained (Barker, 2009). As pipeline construction, among other neoliberal policies, is pursued despite a lack of consent, it becomes clear that these reconciliation efforts are more about economic assimilation and bringing Indigenous nations into the Canadian political economy. Thus, we see the rejection of reconciliation politics and movement toward Land Back as ways to truly address these underlying structures.

Land Back represents a shift not only for Indigenous land defenders and activists, but for settlers as well. Reconciliation politics has largely meant the reconciliation of Indigenous peoples to

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the fact of the state, allowing Canadians to stay out of these messy debates with a land acknowledgment. This will not be possible with Land Back. Reconciliation implies that colonialism in Canada is in the past, so we can all move forward together. Land Back underscores that colonization is very much present and ongoing, in ways that challenge the peaceful and friendly Canadian national image. Unlike reconciliation, Land Back will require settlers to truly engage with what it means to be on this territory together. Decolonization is not just a matter for the state, but for all of us. 🍁

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