

THEORIZING INDIGENOUS ECONOMIC FORMATIONS

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David K. Johnson

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The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, the thesis entitled:

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Examining Committee:

Dr. Glen Coulthard
Supervisor

Dr. Barbara Arneil
Additional Examiner

Abstract

The paper sets out to develop a methodological framework for researching Indigenous political economies. This endeavor has been marked historically by more or less racist and ahistorical culturalisms. Building on recent interventions in Indigenous studies and settler colonial studies, I argue that such research must account for the ongoing history of settler-colonization and Indigenous resistance. Recent work in political theory has taken up this imperative, but the theorization of settler-colonial dispossession comes with problems of its own. The emphasis now laid upon theorizing dispossession, I argue, has produced an amorphous conception of Indigenous political alterities, conceiving them negatively as an absence of European-style institutions. We continue to lack therefore an adequate theory of Indigenous social systems that can account for both historical change and socioeconomic difference. Accordingly, I advocate a Marxian reading of Indigenous and settler economic formations that can better account for social difference by offering a more expansive and comparatist theorization of the categories of production, property, and the metabolic relation to nature. Such a theory offers a powerful resource for understanding the complexity of contemporary settler-colonial relations and for understanding the overlapping interests of socialist and decolonial struggles in North America.

Lay Summary

This paper asks how research relating to Indigenous peoples and traditions ought to be conducted, with special attention paid to Indigenous economic systems. I argue two points. First, I argue that research on Indigenous societies should include historical contexts. While this may seem obvious, it has not been so in the history of anthropology. Second, I argue that the study of Indigenous economies does not require a special theoretical framework. Rather, research can and should be done with a comparative method. To use one comparative method for different economic systems enables us to grasp what is really distinctive about those different economic forms. It also presents the possibility that the method of inquiry can itself be affected and transformed in its encounter with different economic forms. I show how this can be done within and through comparative aspects of Marx and Marxism.

Preface

All research and writing for this thesis was conducted by the author, David K. Johnson, and has not been published elsewhere.

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Introduction

On October 25, 2016, the United States Federal Aviation Administration ordered a no-fly zone over a 154-mile stretch of land in North Dakota. Below, dozens of First Nations stood assembled, in concert with non-Native partners, to scuttle the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. The multi-billion dollar project was slated for construction on illegally occupied Indigenous lands, formally allotted to the Oceti Sakowin (Great Sioux Nation) in the Peace Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868.¹ As people on the ground withstood water cannons and rubber bullets, the no-fly zone tore the cover off of US sovereignty and territorial cohesion – disclosing an essentially *international* encounter. The spectacular display of state and corporate power in the Great Plains laid bare the fact that “global capital accumulation...remains inextricably bound with Indigenous dispossession.”² Far from a fringe issue, the ongoing theft and exploitation of Indigenous lands – and the periodic rebellion of Indigenous nations – constitutes a central fault line in contemporary capitalist globalization.

Recent years have seen an upsurge in Indigenous studies scholarship that challenges current approaches both to research on Indigenous issues and in the social sciences more generally. As Kahnawà:ke Mohawk anthropologist Audra Simpson argues, “the way that we come to know the politics and culture of ‘Indigenous’ peoples requires an accounting that neither anthropology nor political science has done robustly.” She continues:

One field of inquiry—anthropology—has dealt almost exclusively with Indigenous peoples in an ahistorical and depoliticized sense, innocent or dismissive of the strains of

¹ For historical context on the uprising at Standing Rock, see Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 186-91; and Nick Estes, “Fighting for our Lives: #NoDAPL in Historical Context,” *The Red Nation*, September 18, 2016, <https://therednation.org/2016/09/18/fighting-for-our-lives-nodapl-in-context>. For details on the no-fly zone, see Alleen Brown, Will Parrish, and Alice Speri, “Police Used Private Security Aircraft for Surveillance in Standing Rock No-Fly Zone,” *The Intercept*, September 29, 2017, <https://theintercept.com/2017/09/29/standing-rock-dakota-access-pipeline-dapl-no-fly-zone-drones-tigerswan>.

² Manu Vimalassery, “The Wealth of the Natives: Toward a Critique of Settler Colonial Political Economy,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 3, nos. 3-4 (2013): 296.

colonization and then settler colonialism on their politics, looking instead for pure culture and pure interlocutors of that culture. Political science, government, and political theory are relatively new to questions of Indigenous politics and life and deal with them as a “case” that is wholly documentary or an ethical and practical test to the limits of Western norms of acknowledgment. Because of their Western, institutional, and statist focus, none of these disciplines have dealt evenhandedly, robustly, or critically with Indigenous politics and how they challenge what most perceive as settled.³

We simply lack, according to Simpson, a theory of Indigenous *politics*.

This is not for want of research, of course. Traditionally, anthropological theories and ethnographies of Indigenous peoples have tended to elide the context of their production – colonial violence and land theft – in favor of fetishistic portraits of abstract cultural difference. If traditional theorizations are culturalist and ahistorical, however, recent critical interventions that stress ongoing histories of Indigenous dispossession come with their own problems and limitations. One key challenge, as Canadian political theorist Robert Nichols has recently pointed out, is that the language of *dispossession* threatens to naturalize a *possessive* relation to land that is in reality quite alien to many Indigenous political and legal traditions.⁴ The critical turn to the study of dispossession, therefore, risks a corresponding obfuscation of the *differentia specifica* of Indigenous social systems. On the other hand, even in Nichols’ sophisticated intervention, the turn from culture to history reifies Indigeneity as fundamentally and essentially *different*, and thus carries through a trace of anthropological fetishism. In Nichols’ case, this operates through the trope that the category of property is definitionally incommensurable with Indigenous social forms. In contrast, I argue that a reconstituted and politicized theory of Indigeneity has to involve not only a more rigorously *historical* analysis, but also a conception of Indigenous *socioeconomic* forms that is more than the simple negation of Western forms. Accordingly, the

³ Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 11.

⁴ Robert Nichols, “Theft is Property! The Recursive Logic of Dispossession,” *Political Theory* 46, no. 1 (2018): 3-28.

following paper seeks to contribute to an important line of research that has sought to free the theory of Indigenous economic systems from a restrictive culturalist articulation.⁵ More specifically, I seek to enunciate a methodological orientation for theorizing Indigenous political economies that takes its main theoretical inspiration from Karl Marx and the tradition of historical materialism.

This requires a brief explanation. It is undeniable that Marx's own relationship to colonialism is ambiguous and at times problematic. We can gloss this feature of Marx's thought as a form of historicism that sees modern capitalism as a necessary stage on the path to human freedom that categorically wipes out other forms of life.⁶ At its best, however, Marx's critique of capitalism and the diverse interpretative traditions that follow it constitute a rich and globally resonant tradition of anticolonial theory and practice that explodes the limitations of Marx's own individual and Europe-centered perspective.⁷ Rather than treating Indigenous forms of life as superseded, therefore, one aim of this paper is to make available these alternative forms of life for the critique of capitalism. To do this, I take steps toward elaborating the comparatist method embedded in Marx, what international relations scholars David L. Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah have called "Marx's method of 'alternative historical forms.'"⁸

⁵ Rauna Kuokkanen, "Indigenous Economies, Theories of Subsistence, and Women," *American Indian Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 215-240; Aileen Morten-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

⁶ For a contemporary Marxist argument to this effect, see Bill Warren, *Imperialism: Pioneer of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1980). On historicism, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonialism and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁷ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, Ch. 2; Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus, eds., *Marxism, Modernity, and Postcolonial Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2002); Kevin Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), Ch. 8. For a particularly evocative reading of Marx's anticipation of the category of the subaltern, see Vinay Gidwani, "Capitalism's Anxious Whole: Fear, Capture, and Escape in the *Grundrisse*," *Antipode* 40, no. 5 (2008): 857-878.

⁸ David L. Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah, *Savage Economics: Wealth, Poverty, and the Temporal Walls of Capitalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 171.

But to stop here would be to fail to appreciate one of the most foundational methodological interventions of the field of Indigenous studies: that research on Indigenous peoples ought to take as its point of departure – and as its perpetual point of reference – the needs and desires of actually existing Indigenous communities in the present.⁹ The nation-states of North America – comprising the United States and Canada – have never ceased to be settler colonies, bent on the elimination of Native polities.¹⁰ This fact is decidedly underappreciated across a variety of critical traditions. Dene political theorist Glen Coulthard characterizes the gravity of the oversight: “By ignoring or downplaying the injustice of colonial dispossession, critical theory and left political strategy not only risks becoming complicit in the very structures and processes of domination that it ought to oppose, but it also risks overlooking what could prove to be invaluable glimpses into the ethical practices and preconditions required for the construction of a more just and sustainable world order.”¹¹ In overlooking the settler-colonial nature of our own political context, North American theorists and activists make a double sacrifice: on the one hand, our analysis of capitalism is necessarily skewed in so far as it fails to grasp how capitalism manifests historically as a form of ongoing *colonial* dispossession, and on the other hand, we deprive ourselves of a potentially enriching dialogue with the non-capitalist and anti-capitalist modes of thought and practice that have been cultivated on this very soil for hundreds of generations. Progressive social movements that fail to grasp this foundational element of the forces they are up against – that settler state power depends on the continuous usurpation of Indigenous lands – are unlikely to mount effective challenges or pose meaningful

⁹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: Zed Books, 1999); Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2013).

¹⁰ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387-409.

¹¹ Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2014), 12.

alternatives to it. Marxism and other critical traditions have as much to learn from Indigenous communities as they have to offer. This paper is an attempt to engage in that learning.

The paper proceeds in four sections. In the first section I draw on Audra Simpson's critique of Iroquois studies in order to present the historical and theoretical mechanisms by which ethnographic research has developed alongside – and as an instrument of – the land theft and ethnic cleansing that is structurally endemic to settler colonialism. Apart from whatever racist content anthropological theory has produced historically, and apart from the intentions of individual researchers, Simpson shows how the methodological structures of ethnographic practice suffer from “a violence of form.”¹² From Simpson's ethnography I derive two alternative methodological principles that inform my argument: first, that a theory of Indigeneity must account for the context of (ongoing) colonial histories; and second, that a real encounter with ‘difference,’ perhaps paradoxically, requires that we analytically decenter the category of difference. In the second section I take up Glen Coulthard's reading of Marx and “the entangled relationship between capitalism and colonialism.”¹³ Coulthard's intervention takes on the problematic prioritization of labor and exploitation in much Marxian scholarship at the expense of a political theory of land and dispossession, and I highlight how refining the theory of dispossession can serve to disturb a sedimented functionalism within Marxian studies. The third section attempts to develop a Marxian theory of settler-colonial dispossession through a critical engagement with Robert Nichols' recent contribution. In my critique of Nichols, I highlight the limits of analyzing the historical process of dispossession in a way that reproduces a prefigurative category of difference, and I suggest an alternative approach for a Marxian theory of Indigenous political economies. Finally, this alternative method of theorizing Indigenous

¹² Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 99.

¹³ Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 8.

political economies is taken up in more detail in the last section of the paper through an engagement with the Marxian categories of production and metabolism (*Stoffwechsel*). In my conclusion, I reflect on the implications of my macro-theoretical argument for site-specific studies, and on the uses and abuses of historical materialism.

While the paper is a broad engagement with two highly diverse theoretical traditions – Indigenous studies and Marxism – I belong only to the latter tradition. My aim is to privilege the urgent and all too contemporary struggles of Indigenous peoples while also illustrating what other critical traditions might learn from engaging these struggles more seriously as crucial tension points in the unraveling of neoliberal capitalism – and as glimpses of a beyond.

I. Ethnography and Ethnocide

Researching Indigenous societies has never been an innocent endeavor. As Audra Simpson writes, “To speak of Indigeneity is to speak of colonialism and anthropology, as these are means through which Indigenous people have been known and sometimes are still known.”¹⁴ The impositions of modern colonialism were never a function of armed invasion only. Rather, colonialism has always come armed to the teeth with methodology and epistemology. As many scholars have long since documented, the colonizer comes not only to conquer the other, but also – and in the same motion – to know them.¹⁵ As we shall see, research methods pioneered in the colonies weigh heavy on the present.

In her comprehensive critique of Iroquois studies, Simpson lays bare the deep structural relationship between the methodological underpinnings of ethnographic practice and the material interests of settler colonialism.¹⁶ Simpson traces the development of anthropological theory and demonstrates how it articulates seamlessly with a narrative of Indigenous disappearance. She locates the structural relationship between ethnography and ethnocide in the discursive identification of Indigeneity with an imagined precontact cultural tradition. Surreptitiously, Indigenous culture comes to be understood and then delimited as “the structures in place before the white man came.”¹⁷ In this way, Indigenous societies could be grasped as a “wholeness and stability, patterned into ritualized practices that were both intelligible to outsiders and appeared to be in jeopardy of being lost.”¹⁸ The task of anthropology was then to collect and document

¹⁴ Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 95.

¹⁵ Margaret T. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964); Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984).

¹⁶ Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, esp. Ch. 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

those ritualized practices and procedures for posterity; to transcribe and systematize a vanishing social form. As Patrick Wolfe notes, anthropology was therefore primarily “salvage” anthropology. The aim of ethnographic research “was inherently contradictory, its data being jeopardized in the gathering.” The Indigenous peoples encountered by the first European explorers “were already not there.”¹⁹

Because of this methodological contradiction, ethnographers were never primarily or directly concerned with the Indigenous peoples they studied. The subjects of ethnography – the really existing Indigenous peoples encountered by anthropologists – were not actually the subjects at all. They were merely the medium through which true Indigeneity could be glimpsed, “remnants” of the people to be studied, grasped as an “instructive symbol of precontact history.”²⁰ This method of research is known as “upstreaming”: a way of extrapolating an understanding of the past from the vantage of the present. In the field of Iroquois studies, Lewis Henry Morgan’s *The League of the Haudenosaunee* (1851) stands in as the earliest (and therefore the most dependable) study of ‘traditional’ Iroquois society. Since Morgan’s publication, the method of ethnography is to observe contemporary social structures and then to compare this data to what is understood as the ‘authentic’ precolonial model that Morgan captured in the first ethnography.²¹ In this way, Simpson argues, the traditional method of ethnography “may be characterized as one that seeks to authenticate (and then adjudicate) cultural forms rather than analyze them.”²² Permeated by “the desire for fetishized cultural purity,” the practice of ethnography appears as “an authenticating loop that seeks only to confirm

¹⁹ Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London and New York: Cassel, 1999), 35.

²⁰ Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 76, 87.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 86-9.

²² *Ibid.*, 104.

early accounts of Iroquois cultural practice and history.”²³ Further, Simpson argues, this is no accident. Cutting to the heart of anthropological desire, Simpson writes:

Part of this fetishized, deeply controlled canonical approach to “culture as the pure,” “culture as tradition,” “culture as what is prior to settlement” disavows or pushes away its context of articulation: the political project of dispossession and containment, as it actually works to contain, to fetishize and entrap and distill Indigenous discourses into memorizable, repeatable rituals for preservation against a social and political death that was foretold but did not happen.²⁴

The focus on cultural tradition – and the understanding of tradition as precontact cultural purity – achieves a double violence. First, it defines Indigeneity as a transhistorical essence, as a system of political procedures, cultural rituals, philosophical ideas, etc., and the sum of these.²⁵ Second, if Indigeneity is defined as unchanging cultural essence, and if that cultural essence can be shown to have changed (say, as a response to colonial violence), then it can be reasonably argued – and continues to be argued – that Indigenous peoples are no longer ‘really’ Indigenous at all. Maori education scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith puts her finger on the point: “At the heart of such a view of authenticity is a belief that indigenous cultures cannot change, cannot recreate themselves and still claim to be indigenous. Nor can they be complicated, internally diverse or contradictory. Only the West has that privilege.”²⁶ Indigeneity is strategically rendered as precontact, and, as if by a theoretical alchemy, contact compromises the very essence of Indigenous societies. It is not difficult to see how this framework “weds elegantly, effortlessly, and very cleanly with the imperatives of settler colonial projects predicated upon a desire for

²³ Ibid., 34, 75.

²⁴ Ibid., 99.

²⁵ Ibid., 93.

²⁶ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 74. Cf. Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*, 53: “in relocating internally colonized indigenes into some unspecified heterotopia, the xenographic mode of anthropological representation not only denies their expropriation. It also compounds it, by discrediting the ethnic integrity of those natives who survive incorporation.”

territory.”²⁷ How can you steal a people’s land if the very existence of that people on that land is called into question?

In response to this cultural fetishism that discursively deracinates Indigenous social formations while at the same time claiming an exclusive right to scientific knowledge production, Simpson asks a simple but probing series of questions: Why do we study Indigenous peoples in relation to our pre-established theories of Indigenous culture rather than analyzing real people and their real relations in real time? Why has the supposedly objective science of human culture systematically ignored “the scene of object formation – ongoing land dispossession”?²⁸ Why has anthropology produced little else than a schematic conception of Indigenous culture that *necessarily* understands all possible objects of study in the present as secondary and derivative of an untainted precolonial past? Carried to its logical conclusion, Simpson notes wryly, this method reduces culture and tradition to “making baskets as your ancestors did a hundred years ago, or hunting with the precise instruments your great grandfather did 150 years ago, in the exact same spot he did as well, when witnessed and textualized by a white person.”²⁹

What is missing from the canon of Iroquois studies, Simpson suggests, is a more rigorously *historical* analysis that can account for cultural change in the context of the settler-colonial project of land theft and political assimilation. Indeed, according to Simpson, what is missing from the traditional method of ethnography is *any* analysis outside of the narrow procedure of authentication and repetition. Such an approach, perhaps unsurprisingly, misses a

²⁷ Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 71.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 20. To be clear, far from being a relic of the past, the method of upstreaming remains dominant. One need only look at the most recent addition to the canon of Iroquois studies, William Fenton’s *The Great Law and the Longhouse*, published in 1998. Framed as a comprehensive political history of the Iroquois confederacy – a social formation continues to exist at present – Fenton’s narrative ends in the year 1794. See Fenton, *The Great Law and the Longhouse: A Political History of the Iroquois Confederacy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998); and Cf. Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 91.

core principle of the philosophical system underpinning Iroquois cultural traditions. Drawing on 20th century Kahnawà:ke Mohawk philosopher Louis Karoniaktajeh Hall, Simpson argues that the radically democratic and egalitarian structures of Iroquois society are sustained by ethical principles that are understood by the community to transcend their specific institutional instantiations in space and time.³⁰ If anthropology takes ethnographic data and distills theoretical principles out of them, the Indigenous cultural practices in question have traditionally theorized in the opposite direction: community principles inform and give rise to community procedures. In other words, as far as Iroquois philosophical tradition itself is concerned – at least as interpreted by Hall – a social procedure developed for one purpose at one time may be embellished or discarded at another time when the needs and desires of the community change. By this logic, cultural change is not akin to cultural degeneration, but is the very lifeblood of cultural practice in general, and of the “critical, democratically inflected *tradition*” of Iroquois peoples in particular.³¹

Clearly, Simpson’s repudiation of cultural anthropology is not to be understood as a repudiation of the categories of culture and tradition in themselves. Rather, it is a critique of the theory of culture that divides culture from the exigencies of history and politics: culture as a system of ideas and values without material coordinates in space and time; culture as eternal schematic rather than as the practical refinement of a given form of life. The alternative Simpson provides is to dislodge not only the ahistorical theory of culture that has reigned supreme in the study of Indigenous peoples, but also to ask how “cultural analysis may look when difference is not the unit of analysis.”³² An alternative, Simpson suggests, might be to center the historical

³⁰ Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 28.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 31 (emphasis original).

³² *Ibid.*, 97.

process itself – in this case, the process of settler-colonization and Indigenous resistance. This is a call to analyze Indigenous nations as we do all other nations: by taking their real historical circumstances into account. The category of difference, when it prefigures the analysis from the beginning, disallows a robust analysis of Indigenous nationhood and political society. Perhaps paradoxically, Simpson suggests, we need more *general* categories to produce an adequate understanding of particular social formations. The remainder of this paper engages the tools of Marxian analysis to develop one possible avenue for this kind of theoretical production.

II. The Political Economy of Settler Colonialism

Audra Simpson's ethnography of Kahnawà:ke demands that we understand the Indigenous communities of North America not as cultural isolates but as sovereign political orders persisting "in a scene of dispossession."³³ Overwhelmingly, these Indigenous political alterities and the social and ecological relations that constitute them have been conceived historically only on the side of culture – as the sum of ritual procedures and the ideas and ideologies that underpin them. As we have seen, this is hardly accidental: "whereas myth, ritual and (at least, as a conceptual pattern) kinship do not stand in the way of capitalism, hunting and gathering do."³⁴ But ritual action and the ideas about land and life that inform Indigenous societies are not only schematic ideas. As a rule, ideas correspond to material practices and material relations: ideas *take place*. It is the *material* rootedness and *material* reproduction of Indigenous societies through time that Western theory has systematically elided. To remedy this deep rift in the history of theorizing Indigeneity, Simpson advocates a fundamental reorientation. By my reading, Simpson calls for a form of Indigenous studies that understands Indigenous peoples not as *cultural* entities merely, to be conveniently mapped into the interstices of a multicultural settler state, but rather as *political* orders at the level of national sovereignty.³⁵ While it is in the nature of culture to change and develop, this is *not* the same thing as political existence and non-existence. The theory of Indigenous cultures, if it is not to be coupled with Indigenous elimination, needs to be restored to its roots in Indigenous political economy.

In this spirit, I would like now to suggest that Simpson's call for a more rigorously historical analysis of the shifting political-economic structures of settler-colonization and

³³ Ibid., 33.

³⁴ Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*, 55.

³⁵ Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 10.

Indigenous resistance bears more than a passing resemblance to the method of Marxian historical materialism. To elucidate this overlap, I build on Glen Coulthard's recent critical appraisal of Marx's theory of "so-called primitive accumulation" as a tool for understanding the logic and history of settler colonialism. We will first look at Marx's theory of colonial dispossession and its relation to capitalist production, and then we will turn to its limits.

The bulk of Marx's *Capital* is devoted to laying out the structures, mechanisms, and contradictions of capitalist accumulation through the monetary investment in land and other means of production on the one hand, and the exploitation of wage labor on the other. But in the final section Marx pauses to point out that the whole logic of the system presupposes "an accumulation which is not the result of the capitalist mode of production but its point of departure."³⁶ Here, as Coulthard puts it, Marx painstakingly lays bare "the gruesomely violent nature of the transition from feudal to capitalist social relations in western Europe," a process by which formerly independent social forms are severed from their traditional means of subsistence and thrust into a newly institutionalized labor market.³⁷ The key point is not simply that this is a violent process, but that it is a violence characterized by systematic *dispossession*, or the separation of formerly independent producers from their means of livelihood. As US anthropologist Eric Wolf points out, "As long as people can lay their hands on the means of production (tools, land, resources) and use these to supply their own sustenance...there is no compelling reason for them to sell their capacity to work to someone else. For labor power to be offered for sale, the tie between producers and the means of production must be severed for good."³⁸

³⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1990), 873.

³⁷ Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 7.

³⁸ Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 77.

In *Capital*, Marx highlights how this process unfolded in Western Europe through the forcible removal of peasants from lands they had worked and lived upon for generations. But the emergence of capitalism is not endogenous to Western Europe alone, as Marx well understood. The violence of capitalism's birth in England takes on a global character in Marx's theory when he turns to the colonial world. "The discovery of gold and silver in America," Marx wrote, "the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production."³⁹ The other side of primitive accumulation, therefore, was the increasingly global reach of Europe's colonial expansion, which brought enormous portions of the earth under the political and economic control of the European powers, and which made possible the emergence of capitalist production in Europe. In this sense, capitalism was always global.⁴⁰

When Marx turns to the colonial relation, however, he does so only to illustrate a very specific point, namely "that the capitalist mode of production and accumulation, and therefore capitalist private property as well, have for their fundamental condition... the expropriation of the worker."⁴¹ While Marx's insight into the nature of capitalism is unparalleled and his understanding of the coloniality of capitalist expansion is clear, in most of his work Marx is interested in colonialism only insofar as it reveals something essential about the nature of capitalist production in Europe.⁴² In other words, despite the important and foundational

³⁹ Marx, *Capital*, 915.

⁴⁰ For capitalism's irreducibly global inceptions, see Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, *How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2015).

⁴¹ Marx, *Capital*, 940.

⁴² Cf. Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 10.

reflections Marx offers on primitive accumulation both in European and colonial contexts, Marx never gives sustained attention to the different experiences and consequences of dispossession across space and time. Rather, he is interested in the *function* that dispossession fulfills in producing one particular outcome, namely the cooptation and exploitation of labor by capital in production.

This functionalism carries through into the recent revival of the theory of primitive accumulation catalyzed by Marxist geographer David Harvey. Harvey's repurposing of the term as "accumulation by dispossession" has been enormously influential on the question of how to understand the enduring nature of dispossession in contemporary capitalism in the shape of land grabbing, privatization, financial speculation, gentrification, Indigenous displacement, and imperialist war-making.⁴³ But while mobilized to deal with the enduring salience of dispossession in the capitalist world system, the emphasis of the new theories of primitive accumulation remains transfixed on its function in "compensating for the chronic problems of overaccumulation arising within [capitalism's] expanded reproduction."⁴⁴ While there is a growing consensus among critical scholars that dispossession remains an enduring and necessary feature of capitalist development, the crucial point is that even the most refined theorizations come with a very persistent shortcoming: the violence of *dispossession* is theorized as a mechanism for (re)producing the conditions of *exploitation*, the latter remaining the analytical priority.⁴⁵ Hence *accumulation* by dispossession.

⁴³ David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), Ch. 4.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴⁵ This critique holds for theorists as varied as David Harvey, Massimo De Angelis, Silvia Federici, and William Clare Roberts: Harvey, *The New Imperialism*; De Angelis, "Separating the Doing and the Deed: Capital and the Continuous Character of Enclosures," *Historical Materialism* 12, no. 2 (2004): 57-87; Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004); Roberts, "What Was Primitive Accumulation? Reconstructing the Origin of a Concept," *European Journal of Political Theory* online publication (2017): 1-21. In thinking through this lacuna in Marxist theory, I am indebted to personal conversations with Glen Coulthard. On the critique of functionalist theories, two articles by Onur Ulas Ince have been especially

Seeing as it is dispossession that is the primary ill that Indigenous peoples seek to redress – not exploitation via commodity production, not unequal distribution, not abuse by a state whose existence is on the whole legitimate – this is a potentially serious defect of Marxian formulations, both classical and contemporary. Nor can the non-progression from dispossession to proletarianization be explained as an accident or an exception to the rule. Rather, the phenomenon is a product of a different system than Marx labored so diligently to understand. As Patrick Wolfe has asserted, in settler-colonial contexts, “invasion” – dispossession – “is a structure, not an event.”⁴⁶ The specificity of settler colonialism is that exploitation of Indigenous labor – in stark contrast to other forms of colonialism – is “a contradiction, rather than an inherent component, of the system.”⁴⁷ For this reason, Coulthard points out, Indigenous struggles are “primarily inspired by and oriented around *the question of land* – a struggle not only *for* land in the material sense, but also deeply *informed* by what the land *as system of reciprocal relations and obligations* can teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms – and less around our emergent status as ‘rightless proletarians.’”⁴⁸ For our purposes, the question is whether or not Marx’s theory constitutes a significant resource for understanding the specificity of settler-colonial social systems, notwithstanding Marx’s own lack of analysis on this question. Can the first step of Marx’s primitive accumulation thesis – the dispossession or expropriation of people from their

illuminating: Ince, “Primitive Accumulation, New Enclosures, and Global Land Grabs: A Theoretical Intervention,” *Rural Sociology* 79, no. 1 (2014): 104–131; and Ince, “Between Equal Rights: Primitive Accumulation and Capital’s Violence,” *Political Theory*, online publication (2018): 1-30. The exception to this critique is perhaps the work of ecological Marxists, most notably John Bellamy Foster: Foster, *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).

⁴⁶ Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*, 2. Cf. Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” 388.

⁴⁷ Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*, 27, note 31.

⁴⁸ Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 13 (emphasis original).

land – be theoretically disentangled from the process of proletarianization and accumulation by exploitation as Marx observed it in the English case?

I believe that it can. To understand settler-colonial contexts in their political and economic specificity, we might follow Coulthard’s suggestion of “*contextually shifting* our investigation from an emphasis on the *capital relation* to the *colonial relation*.”⁴⁹ The task is to “disaggregate” the elements of Marx’s original primitive accumulation thesis: by isolating the two processes of primitive accumulation and grasping their distinctiveness we can open up the possibility of analyzing the specificity of settler-colonial social relations as a system of “structured dispossession” that operates and reproduces by a logic not reducible to capitalist production.⁵⁰ Such an intervention is a challenge to Marxian theory to develop an adequate theory of land relations: including, but not limited to, land expropriation.

Once this disarticulation of dispossession and proletarianization is achieved and we can view the process of dispossession in its own right, however, some complications within the category of dispossession come into sharper focus. The central problem, as Robert Nichols has recently defined it, is that the concept of *dispossession* immediately implies a prior possession, which may obscure more than it reveals about the process we seek to understand when we employ the term. This is particularly concerning for theorizing the expropriations that constitute settler-colonization, since, as Nichols avers, Indigenous societies did not relate to land in a proprietary or possessive way before the arrival of colonialism. In the fields of Indigenous and settler-colonial studies, according to Nichols, the idea of dispossession “is used in a seemingly paradoxical manner to denote the fact that Indigenous peoples have had the territorial foundation

⁴⁹ Coulthard, *ibid.*, 10 (emphasis original).

⁵⁰ Robert Nichols, “Disaggregating Primitive Accumulation,” *Radical Philosophy* 194 (November/December 2015): 18-28; Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 7.

of their societies (i.e. their ancestral lands) *stolen* from them, while simultaneously asserting that these lands were not ‘property’ in the (pre-colonial) first instance.”⁵¹ It is a dilemma we all know well: if Indigenous traditions do not relate to land in terms of property, possession, ownership, etc., then how can ‘their’ land have been stolen? It is to this question that we now turn.

⁵¹ Nichols, “Theft is Property,” 11.

III. Dispossession, Property, Indigeneity

Nichols traces this conceptual difficulty back to Marx's confrontation with the French anarchists surrounding the origins of capitalist property relations in Europe. As is well known, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the figurehead of French anarchism, summed up his theory of property in the compelling phrase: "*Property is theft!*" While this formulation may be rhetorically attractive, Marx took issue with it on the grounds that it caricatures the complex historical process by which capitalist private property comes into being, and consequently muddies the specificity of capitalist social relations. Further – and this is Nichols' primary concern – the language of theft, or dispossession, appears to naturalize the very possessive property relations that Proudhon sought to criticize. As Nichols explains, "insofar as dispossession and expropriation gain their normative force from a perceived violation or corruption of actually existing property relations (i.e., a species of theft), they are generally conservative concepts that moreover tend to reinforce a proprietary model of social relations that critical theorists generally seek to undermine."⁵² Formally repudiating the institution of private property, Proudhon and his comrades simultaneously smuggled it back in.

As Nichols points out, there is no shortage of critics eager to delegitimize Indigenous struggles by recourse to this kind of logic: if Indigenous traditions did not have property in land prior to colonization, how can they claim it now?⁵³ To respond to this rather cynical line of reasoning, Nichols argues, we need a way of thinking about colonial land theft without naturalizing the possessive individualism of European political theory. In order to enable a normative critique of dispossession that does not rest on a "proprietary model of social relations," Nichols highlights what he calls the "recursive logic" by which the theft of

⁵² Ibid., 4.

⁵³ Ibid., 11. This conceit is by no means restricted to right wing currents.

Indigenous lands is carried out in a way that only retroactively inscribes the land in question in the language of property and possession.⁵⁴ By recognizing how dispossession operates recursively, Nichols argues, the concept “can be usefully reconstructed to name a unique historical process, one in which property is generated under conditions that require its divestment and alienation from those who appear, only retrospectively, as its original owners.”⁵⁵ We can then acknowledge that “colonization (especially *settler* colonization) does involve a unique species of theft,” so long as we are clear what precisely we mean by this. For Nichols, “colonization entails the large-scale transfer of land that simultaneously *recodes* the object of exchange in question such that it appears *retrospectively* to be a form of theft in the ordinary sense.”⁵⁶ Nichols thus delivers the punchline: “possession does not precede dispossession but is its effect.”⁵⁷ Proudhon’s formulation makes more sense in the opposite direction: “*Theft is property!*”

Nichols’ aim here is to fill in the purely negative rendering of dispossession by demonstrating the legal gymnastics through which the settler state *produces* property in Indigenous lands by simultaneously instituting *and* negating Indigenous land title on the European model.⁵⁸ Nichols favors this recursive reading because he believes it avoids the naturalization of capitalist institutions and “can name a process of dispossession without presuming an original possession.”⁵⁹ Nichols’ solution to the dilemma therefore is “to insist that dispossession is not really about possession at all.”⁶⁰ Rather, property is produced retroactively through the transformation of non-propertyed social forms into propertyed ones. In this way,

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 4, 14.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 14 (emphasis original).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁸ See *ibid.*, Sec. 3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

Nichols delivers a more positive reading of dispossession by shedding light on a significant discursive mechanism of the settler-colonial logic of elimination.

If this recursive logic makes Indigenous dispossession *appear* as “theft in the ordinary sense,” however, we are left wondering what the *extraordinary* nature of the process really consists in. By Nichols’ logic, settler-colonization is a form of dispossession only in a recursive, almost optical-illusionary sense. Nichols’ reading therefore illuminates a discursive mechanism of settler colonialism but at the expense of theorizing the actual material process of land theft that underpins and gives rise to this discursive formation. The reason for this, I submit, is that Nichols misses part of the probity as well as the positive potential of Marx’s critique of Proudhon. This is most evident in Nichols’ persistent conflation of *property* with *possession*, and his operationalizing of both terms as a shorthand for the possessive individualism of private property under capitalism. That is, while Nichols goes to some lengths to denaturalize the hyper-possessive forms of social life characteristic of capitalist societies, in the same motion he conflates property as such with its commodity form, preserving the false universalism of liberal theory precisely where he claims we need to overcome it. For the purposes of this paper, the problem is more than mere semantics: to negate the possibility of Indigenous property forms creates a serious obstacle to understanding – not to mention reinvigorating – Indigenous political economies.

The recursive logic leaves us with an amorphous conception of Indigenous social formations and therefore of the nature of dispossession itself. In order to really understand the process of dispossession as something other than the removal of private property from one party to another – that is, in order to understand the collision of two radically different political economies – we need a more positive theory of Indigenous economic forms. A better way out of

the conceptual difficulty that Nichols lays out for us, I argue, is to reconsider the nature of property.

In Proudhon's formulation, property is by definition an individual appropriation of the commons, which until that initial appropriation was owned by no one.⁶¹ A more complete formulation of the anarchist quip might therefore be: *Property is theft of the commons!* The problem Marx identifies here is not, as Nichols suggests, the language of theft per se (which Marx himself will employ quite liberally)⁶², but rather the individualist social ontology embedded in the notion that individuals could perform a pre-social appropriation of the commons. This is because, for Marx, the commons is already socially instituted by definition.⁶³ In Marx's terms, "All production is appropriation of nature on the part of an individual within and through a specific form of society."⁶⁴ The result of this appropriation is called "property." In wedding the concept of property to that of appropriation, Marx concludes that "there can be no production and hence no society where some form of property does not exist."⁶⁵ The concept of property, therefore, is tightly related to the concept of appropriation. This is true of Western political economy more generally. But whereas classical political economy begins with the state of nature, which gives rise inexorably to the institution of private property, Marx repudiates this starting-point as ahistorical and ethnocentric.⁶⁶ Rather than seeing one form of property everywhere Marx overcomes this bourgeois ethnocentrism by highlighting the inherently general

⁶¹ Ibid., 6.

⁶² For a discussion of Marx's use of the terms appropriation (*Aneignung*), expropriation (*Enteignung*), and robbery (*Beraubung*), see John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, "The Expropriation of Nature," *Monthly Review* 69, no. 10 (March 2018).

⁶³ Cf. Karl Polanyi, "The Economy as Instituted Process," in George Dalton, ed., *Primitive, Archaic, and Modern Economies: Essays of Karl Polanyi* (New York: Anchor Books, 1968).

⁶⁴ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1973), 87.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 88.

⁶⁶ The individual in the state of nature, Marx satirizes, "soon begins, like a good Englishman, to keep a set of books." Marx, *Capital*, 169-70.

or comparatist intension of the concept of property. In other words, Marx eliminates the concept of “non-property,” not by universalizing a specific form of property, but by developing the concept of property as appropriation of nature.⁶⁷ This socially instituted appropriation or mediation of nature is the material precondition for all forms of social life, a premise I explore in more detail in the next section. In short, to produce – to interact with and appropriate nature to satiate human needs – is to produce property. This reformulation allows us to escape the need to conceive Indigenous social formations as the flat negation of propertied social relations, which, by this definition, they could not be. The question, therefore, is not whether property can be said to exist within a given social formation. The question is what *kind* of property relations a given mode of production generates in the course of its socially instituted appropriation of nature. We can then be more precise about specific forms of property and propertied social relations, and the specific legal structures that govern these relations.

In failing to recognize property in the diversity of its forms, we not only lose sight of part of the process we seek to understand (colonial dispossession), but we are also disabled from theorizing Indigenous social forms in a more positive register. The notion that Indigenous property is a contradiction in terms appears to be a residue of the notion that Indigenous peoples are ahistorical beings, living at one with nature *without the mediation of social practice*. Hence we may not want to concede any longer that property is an exclusively Western institution. When property is defined in its restrictive privatized or commoditized form, it is ethnocentric and ahistorical, and should be resisted on those grounds. However, as I have attempted to show, the concept of property as formulated in Western political economy – as appropriation of nature – contains a more subversive and relativizing potentiality than the classical theorists could afford

⁶⁷ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 84.

to see, and that Marx pounces on to construct his critique. When defined in this way, it is no longer clear that defending “previously existing property relations,” be a bad or conservative thing at all.⁶⁸ Indeed, in settler-colonial contexts especially, it would appear quite the contrary: such an approach provides an opening to challenge capitalist property relations with non-capitalist alternatives. Rather than finding a different category (or simply resting content with a negative definition), it may perhaps be better – at least as a relativizing exercise – to sheer the concept of property from its narrowly ethnocentric articulation. The more expansive conception of property I have laid out offers one possible path to a more positively charged theory of Indigenous political economies. Having charted out this alternative exit from the conceptual difficulty Nichols enunciates, we can now return to the driving question of this paper: If a people are forcibly *separated* from land, and if their original ties to the land are not mediated by capitalist legal relations, then in what does their original tie, or system of ties, to the land, consist?

⁶⁸ Nichols, “Theft is Property,” 9.

IV. Indigenous Economic Formations

What we are seeking is a method of analysis that can employ comparative categories rather than one that privileges and projects a specific form of socioeconomic organization over all others. In this final section, I further develop the comparatist potential of Marxian political economy and begin to tease out the implications for a theory of Indigenous economic forms. To do this, I lay out Marx's general theory of social production as formulated in his articulation of "the labor process." I then hone in on the two interlocking categories in Marx's analysis that highlight the articulation of human social formations with their natural environments: production and metabolism.

Let us recall Audra Simpson's critique of the category of difference in the analysis of Indigenous cultural traditions historically. Her argument is that difference prefigures – or, to put it more strongly, precludes – the analysis of Indigenous social forms. I interpret Simpson's call to *decenter* the category of difference as an expression of the need for what we might call a general theory of social life or social reproduction. Such a theory would enable us to overcome the imperative to theorize non-Indigenous forms of property on the one hand, and Indigenous forms of "non-property" on the other, which as we saw inscribes a negativity into the heart of Indigenous economic forms. As observed, the traditional anthropological method hypostatizes difference rather than analyzing it, and contemporary critical approaches reproduce this prefigurative stopgap. An alternative method, I argue, is to distinguish between different forms of relating to non-human nature by deploying general categories that possess – by virtue of their generality – more comparatist potentialities. Admittedly, this is not a popular call these days from the perspective of many critical traditions. Many have attached themselves to a rather dogmatic skepticism of any notion of universality, which is immediately equated with

homogeneity and the assimilationist thrusts of Eurocentric social theory. But this is by no means the nature of general or universal categories as such.⁶⁹ On the contrary, as I suggest in the previous section, it is only with a general category that we can hope to grasp specific instantiations of that category in their concrete individuality. Moreover, this process of traveling from the general to the specific cannot but react back on our understanding of the general categories themselves. With these considerations in mind, let us now turn to the deployment of general categories in Marx's method.

The most extensive methodological discussions in Marx's writings come in *Grundrisse*. Marx begins this text with a statement of methodological principle: "Individuals producing in society – hence socially determined individual production – is, of course, the point of departure."⁷⁰ This starting-point is to be understood in contrast to that of classical political economy, which begins with the "isolated hunter and fisherman" subsisting in a pre-social state of nature. As we saw, Marx repudiates this starting-point as ahistorical. Individuals are, as a rule, members of a social totality: "The human being is in the most literal sense a [political animal], not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal that can individuate itself only in the midst of society."⁷¹ The appearance of the individual in "dot-like isolation" from their own social context is a very historically specific social development.⁷²

Does this mean one is to start with a specific social totality – "the real and the concrete" – rather than an abstract category, the 'state of nature' model being a particularly erroneous example of the latter? Not exactly. While this seems the correct place to start, Marx reflects, it

⁶⁹ "[T]his theoretical disavowal of the universal seems to be based on a prior and *prima facie* acceptance of Eurocentrism's reified conception of the universal as immanent and homogeneous." Kamran Matin, "Redeeming the Universal: Postcolonialism and the Inner Life of Eurocentrism," *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 2 (2013): 362.

⁷⁰ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 83.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 485.

“proves false.” Why? Because society itself is already an abstraction. Starting with society as a whole – Marx gives the example of “population,” “nation,” “state,” etc. – produces an incomprehensible conglomerate rather than enabling a systematic picture.

Thus, if I were to begin with the population, this would be a chaotic conception of the whole, and I would then, by means of further determination, move analytically towards ever more simple concepts, from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until I had arrived at the simplest determinations. From there the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as a chaotic conception of the whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations.⁷³

It is this process of traveling from the abstract concept back down into the concrete that Marx identifies as the proper method. In other words, we cannot grasp any specific social formation with the general category, even though the general category is applicable universally and orients the study of a given form. Rather, with abstraction in hand, the theorist must descend back down into the concrete, since what is the concrete but “the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse”?⁷⁴ As cultural theorist Stuart Hall summarizes: Marx’s “is a method which groups, not a simple ‘essence’ behind the different historical forms, but precisely the many determinations in which ‘essential differences’ are preserved.”⁷⁵ General categories, then, are not there simply to be superimposed onto a diversity of forms. Rather, the utility of a general category is to highlight the universal elements of a given form, so as to better grasp its distinctiveness. This is the methodological element in Marx that can be deployed for theorizing diverse social formations on their own terms.

The general category of production, or the labor process, is the central anchor in Marx’s political economy. As Eric Wolf observes, the term “production,” in Marx’s system, “embraced

⁷³ Ibid., 100.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 101.

⁷⁵ Stuart Hall, “Notes on Marx’s Method: A ‘Reading’ of the ‘1857 Introduction,’” *Cultural Studies* 17, no. 2 (2003): 120.

at once the changing relations of humankind to nature, the social relations into which humans enter in the course of transforming nature, and the consequent transformations of human symbolic capability.”⁷⁶ In a key passage in *Capital*, Marx turns from his analysis of the capitalist mode of production to reflect on the basic elements of the labor process irrespective of its historically specific manifestations.

Labour is, first of all, a process between man [*sic*] and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. He sets in motion the natural forces that belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature.⁷⁷

Production, or appropriation of nature through the labor process, regardless of the specific forms in which the process takes place, is for Marx “the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence.”⁷⁸ The different forms of organizing and mobilizing labor in its interaction with nature are conceived by Marx as different *modes of production*. A mode of production, then, is “a specific, historically occurring set of social relations through which labor is deployed to wrest energy from nature by means of tools, skills, organization, and knowledge.”⁷⁹

The key concept that grounds Marx’s understanding of this relationship between human society and non-human nature is the concept of “metabolism.” This concept refers to the “exchange of matter and energy” and the “regulatory processes that govern the interchange of materials” in ecological systems.⁸⁰ Marx adapts this concept from the field of organic chemistry

⁷⁶ Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*, 21.

⁷⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 283.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 290.

⁷⁹ Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*, 75. Cf. Coulthard’s discussion of how the Dene Nation appropriate this concept: Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, Ch. 2.

⁸⁰ John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, “Marx’s Ecology for the 21st Century,” *World Review of Political Economy* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 144.

to understand the interchange between human social formations and non-human nature.⁸¹ The way human societies regulate their metabolic interaction with nature is determined, in part, by their social and political organization. But the relation goes both ways: “nature thus transformed affects...the architecture of human social bonds.”⁸² Human societies form deep ties with the natural environment, reinforcing its movements here, and transforming them to suit human purposes there. The deepest and most wide-ranging implication of the theory of social metabolism is that as humans transform nature, they also transform themselves. I want to stress here the difficulty of reducing Marx’s conception of the labor process to a crude, one-sided materialism. Contrary to what is often assumed, this is not a materialist conception in the reductive sense.⁸³ A society’s mode of production – that is, its metabolic relationship with nature – is determined as much by the development and reproduction of ideas, knowledge, and ethical conceptions of the world as it is by its material production.

While Marx was primarily concerned with how labor operates within the structures of one particular mode of production – namely, capitalism – the totality of his analysis turns on the notion that capitalism is only one historically specific mode of production of many possible ones. Even in his most probing critique of the logic of capitalism, therefore, alternative historical forms are never far off, for these supply us with the capacity to relativize capitalist institutions.⁸⁴ The key value of the idea of a mode of production, therefore, is not to create a taxonomy of different and mutually exclusive economic formations. Rather, this framework is to be valued “in its capacity to underline the strategic relationships involved in the deployment of social labor by

⁸¹ For discussion, see Foster, *Marx’s Ecology*, Ch. 5.

⁸² Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*, 74.

⁸³ For discussion of Marx’s dialectical materialism and its subsequent misreading, see Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), Ch. 3; Foster, *Marx’s Ecology*; and Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, Ch. 2.

⁸⁴ Blaney and Inayatullah, *Savage Economics*, 172.

organized human pluralities.”⁸⁵ The question that remains to be explored is how this analytical framework can assist in carrying forward specific case studies. Of course, I have not presumed in this short, macro-theoretical paper to say anything about specific Indigenous modes of production. What I have tried to offer here is a methodological baseline for such inquiries. In the conclusion, I indicate how this method might be carried forward, and I clarify what this method is not.

⁸⁵ Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*, 76.

Conclusion

In beginning with Audra Simpson's probing critique of ethnographic methodology, we saw how researching Indigenous societies has historically gone hand in hand with the settler-colonial project of eliminating them. Simpson's critique lays out an alternative to this discursive violence by returning the study of Indigeneity to history and – as I have interpreted Simpson's call – to political economy. To move toward this alternative, we turned to Glen Coulthard's reading of Marx and primitive accumulation. We found that Marx offers crucial insight into capital's emergence in "blood and fire" and its relentless drive to separate workers from their means of production and subsistence. But we also found that Marx's work is limited by an analysis that privileges the function of dispossession at the expense of its own logical structure and historically diverse manifestations. Refocusing our analysis on the structural differences that obtain in colonial, and particularly settler-colonial, contexts, I highlighted a limit in Robert Nichols' theorization of dispossession as a recursive process. I argued that his theory of the recursive logic of dispossession comes at the expense of a closer reading of the tensions between capitalist and Indigenous economic formations. I argued that the transhistorical categories of Marxian political economy – including property (appropriation), production, and the metabolic relation to nature – opens the door to the possibility of a theory of Indigenous economic formations that is something more than the mere negation of Western institutions. I laid out a brief sketch of how the modes of production framework might be used in theorizing Indigenous political economies in a way that is both open to and capable of analyzing historical processes of change and transformation. What I have tried to offer is an analytical method by which we can grasp economic difference in a way that centers, rather than hides, a given context of colliding

historical trajectories. I have argued that historical materialism, with its emphasis on the historical and political construction of socioeconomic processes, offers one such path.

To the question of how land can be dispossessed without ever having been a commodity, we can now give the answer: settler-colonial dispossession is the annulment, in whole or in part, not of a commodity-relation retroactively posited, but of Indigenous nations' sovereign regulation of the metabolic relation to nature. Dispossession is the structural negation of Indigenous self-determination in forging the social metabolism. Hardly an idle historical study, this paper has attempted to emphasize the present urgency of understanding how contemporary capitalism remains systematically dependent on Indigenous dispossession.

In thinking in terms of the human metabolism with nature, I am of course employing an analytic distinction between human society and non-human nature. This distinction has come under attack from many different directions, as if it entails an ontological dualism between society and nature. I believe that is a misreading.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, it could be objected that I have universalized the concept of appropriation and metabolic interaction in a way that may be at odds with the diversity of Indigenous cosmologies. I would like to answer this concern with a statement of clarification.

As international relations scholar Robbie Shilliam reminds us, historical materialism is nothing more than a “profane science of the profane.”⁸⁷ Admittedly, Marxists are some of the first to forget that “[t]here is a difference between profanely understanding materiality and

⁸⁶ The mistake is to conflate the logical and the descriptive registers of social theory. This mistake can be observed, e.g., in Jason W. Moore's critique of John Bellamy Foster. See Moore, “Metabolic Rift or Metabolic Shift? Dialectics, Nature, and the World-Historical Method,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38, no. 1 (2017): 1-46.

⁸⁷ Robbie Shilliam, “More Groundings,” *The Disorder of Things*, February 6, 2016, <https://thedisorderofthings.com/2016/02/06/more-groundings/#more-12243>. In thinking through the limits in historical materialism, I have also found much insight in Sankaran Krishna, “Of Uncolonized, Spiritual Hinterlands,” *The Disorder of Things*, January 31, 2016, <https://thedisorderofthings.com/2016/01/31/of-uncolonized-spiritual-hinterlands>.

raising that materiality to the level of providence.”⁸⁸ The problem arises, to continue with Shilliam, when historical materialism presumes to possess “a profane understanding not just of world-historical dominion (which it does provide) but of world-historical *resistance* too.”⁸⁹ But as Shilliam crucially reminds us, in many cases, “the sources of creative survival and resistance exceed the profane.”⁹⁰ The critique is that historical materialism sees a Marxist – or a to-be Marxist – in every form of resistance. Forgetting its own methodological limits, historical materialism is liable to tread into baseless assumptions about the motivations, means, ends, and meanings of diverse resistance movements, flattening and negating the autonomy and integrity of the different knowledge traditions that are mobilized to anti-capitalist effect. When historical materialism devolves into a rigid set of prescriptions and projections, interpreting every movement of resistance in its own likeness, or in accordance with its own utopian blueprints, it ceases to be what it is: a critique of the present. That critique utilizes an abstract distinction – *not* a dualist ontology – of nature and society, in order to locate where human agency lies, in given places and times, for the purpose of dismantling systems of social domination. As such, it is a tradition of analysis that one can engage or dispense with, but it is certainly not meant to replace (or displace) other living knowledge traditions. Rather, it requires constant dialogue with historical, geographical, and cosmological differences to sustain it and to breathe new life into its project of universal emancipation. I hope this paper can be read as a contribution to that dialogue.

⁸⁸ Shilliam, “More Groundings.”

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* (emphasis original).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

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