

USA: Indigenous Resistance Is Post-Apocalyptic

Friday 13 September 2019, by [ESTES Nick](#), [SERPE Nick](#) (Date first published: 31 July 2019).

Nick Estes discusses the deep historical roots of the convergence at Standing Rock, why Indigenous peoples have taken a leading role in the climate justice movement, and why decolonization must be part of any left-wing agenda.

[Booked](#) is a series of interviews about new books. For this edition, senior editor Nick Serpe spoke with Nick Estes, author of [Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance](#), published in May by Verso Books. Estes is also the co-editor, with Jaskiran Dhillon, of [Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement](#), out this August from the University of Minnesota Press.

In *Our History Is the Future*, Nick Estes, a citizen of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, uses the occasion of the 2016–2017 grassroots movement against the Dakota Access Pipeline—the largest Indigenous-led protest movement in North America in the twenty-first century—to look at the longer history of resistance to settler colonialism by the Oceti Sakowin (or “Seven Council Fires,” often referred to by the settler-originated name “Great Sioux Nation”). While the movement against that pipeline now also lies in the past, Estes explains how it continues to feed movements in motion today. In this interview, he also outlines what climate justice activists can learn from Indigenous political struggle, and why decolonization must be an essential part of any serious left-wing agenda, in the United States and beyond.

Nick Serpe: In *Our History is the Future* you cover a number of episodes in the history of the Oceti Sakowin that connect a long tradition of resistance to settler colonialism to the fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016. Why is it important to think historically about Indigenous resistance today, and what was so significant about #NoDAPL, the convergence at Standing Rock, even if the pipeline was eventually authorized and completed?

Nick Estes: U.S. history typically dates anything about Indigenous people as happening in the nineteenth century or before. There is not a sense of a continuity from the nineteenth to twentieth century. But in my research, for example, I found a key link that carried nineteenth-century resistance into the twentieth-century movements. The Indian Wars are seen as beginning and ending in one century but not continuing on with the implementation of the reservation system and then onward to the construction of the dams in the middle of the twentieth century. A decade after the Wounded Knee Massacre [in 1890], Indigenous resistance efforts attempted to bring forward their treaty claims to a world forum at the League of Nations—that’s huge. Often times we say that Indigenous resistance faded after the massacre, alongside Fredrick Jackson Turner’s frontier. That’s more of a trope of U.S. history than reality. When I was told those oral histories it was like this through line that tells a different story than tragic defeat. James Mooney’s book, *The Ghost Dance Religion*, for example, misinterpreted the Ghost Dance as a millenarian revivalist movement, as more akin to Christianity. In his account and in popular understanding, our resistance died at Wounded Knee. But it didn’t die.

This history makes Standing Rock simultaneously exceptional and not exceptional. As an organizer and an intellectual, I think there is purchase to that kind of thinking: not just thinking about your movement as doing something new but as a continuation. Standing Rock was a reiteration our traditions of resistance: the unification of grassroots movements with tribal councils, the treaty councils, the reunification of our Seven Nations, the Oceti Sakowin. Alongside all of these, you saw the best of our diplomatic tradition—"Lakota" means friend and ally—that's one of our primary tools of resistance. It was a convergence of all of those elements—that's why Standing Rock was a certain kind of historical turning point, not just for us as Oceti Sakowin but for the Indigenous movement in America.

Serpe: For many, #NoDAPL was their first encounter with the term "water protector." Many were using an old concept, Mni Wiconi, "water is life," as a rallying cry. Beyond the obvious fact that water is essential to life, why did water figure so centrally in the fight against the pipeline? How does that relate to the historic relationship between the people who have lived on that land and colonial settlement around the Missouri River?

Estes: The invaders came by water, on ships or upstream on the Missouri River, the Mni Sose. Our first encounter with the colonizer was mediated by the use of water as a highway, as a means of travel. Our first relationship with the United States government was mediated by the control over a water source. It wasn't just about drinking water, which is important, or watering animals or plants. Water is life in the sense that mobility is life. It gave the ability to move and to travel, to hunt and fish. That first relationship with the United States was also inherently a military encounter, so we called them Mílahaŋska, which means "long knives," because of the sabers they carried. Later on came fur traders in militarized units, the vanguards of capitalism, then the Army Corps of Engineers, who eventually determined the path that the Dakota Access Pipeline would take.

In that sense, "water protector" is related to the first encounter with Lewis and Clark in 1804. We are still defending our rights to this water, which were codified in our treaties and agreements with the United States, made under our authority of the pipe, or the Canupa as we call it, and which the United States continually refuses to uphold. But those covenants go back further to our original agreements with the nonhuman world, with the White Buffalo Calf Woman who brought us into correct relations with the water, the land, and the animals. We call her Pte Skan Win, the primary prophet of Lakota people who brought us our spiritual teachings and values. Mni Wiconi precedes all of that.

At the same time, when we say something like "water is life" or "water protectors," why should we as Indigenous people have to perform a kind of spiritual connection with water? It should be enough to say that every group of people on this planet has a basic human right to water. And access to water is an issue of class: in Johannesburg, Delhi, Flint, Michigan, and Standing Rock.. If we look at the major water consumers in the Northern Plains, they're fracking rigs, which access to millions of gallons of fresh water every day for free, while simultaneously polluting millions of gallons of fresh water, and irrigation for large-scale industrial agriculture production. They aren't drawing water from the river itself but from the Ogallala Aquifer, one of the largest underground aquifers in the world. It is currently being depleted though overuse and misuse.

Some of the poorest people in North America are taking on some of the most powerful interests over the question of access to clean drinking water. That is going to continue to define struggles over resources for generations as climate change intensifies. Even the Department of Defense has identified water as a key strategic interest and called climate change a "threat multiplier" that will increase or intensify the conflict over resources, domestically and at the international level. The threat for them is climate refugees: millions of people fleeing their homelands because of human-induced—or rather capitalist-induced—climate change.

So “water protector” has a meaning that goes beyond what is categorically seen as Indigenous. Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, for example, or anybody who crossed the security barrier at the Oceti Sakowin camp or at Sacred Stone became a water protector in that moment. “Water protector,” the slogan “water is life,” were popularized by Standing Rock, and they’ve become icons of this generation’s climate justice movement.

That’s a lesson we should be taking in discussions of the Green New Deal—that the most spectacular, popular climate justice movement in recent memory, which I would say spring-boarded the Green New Deal, was Indigenous-led. It continues to be Indigenous-led. So why isn’t decolonization part of the agenda? I think there is a miscalculation that everyday Americans can’t hold the complexity of this nation, the fact that it is a settler-colonial nation, in their mind while at the same time understanding that decolonization can be implemented in almost any progressive struggle.

Serpe: In the book, you consistently take prophecy, tradition, and different epistemologies seriously, but the book is still rooted in a materialist analysis of history and the current moment. Why is it important to bring these analyses together? How do you do this without being dismissive or condescending on the one hand, and without mystifying or romanticizing something that has to do with people’s everyday lives on the other?

Estes: Indigenous studies has proposed and resolved certain questions in the four decades of its existence, including the idea that Indigenous perspectives are valid and in some ways superior to colonizers’ perspectives on our history—and that Indigenous peoples have the right to tell their own stories according to their own traditions. I think that’s really important. What I’ve learned from my own study, especially books like Engels’s *The Origin of Family, Private Property, and the State*—there are problems with the book, but it also shows how Indigenous history can teach us that capitalism is neither inevitable nor natural. It shows that there were non-capitalist societies, non-capitalist nations, non-capitalist civilizations, that had advanced, and that were knocked off of their developmental trajectory by colonialism.

The attempt of Indigenous studies is, very much in the line with the thinking of African Marxist revolutionary Amílcar Cabral, to “return to the source.” He’s not saying return to a mystical Indigenous past. What he’s saying is to return to that path of social development that we were once on, to take our experience as colonized people as well as this non-capitalist, anti-colonial, anti-capitalist core of Indigenous history, combine them and use those tools to view our history. We live in a capitalist society and we can’t extricate ourselves from that, but at the same time we have remnants of a non-capitalist way of viewing the world. And it is grounded in our relationships.

This is a huge word in Indigenous studies right now—relationality—that I think has become mystified. We’re not the Na’vi of *Avatar* running around plugging our brains into trees trying to download data. I go back to the buffalo, because buffalo relations really represent the form of relationality that we had with animals. It wasn’t just this mystical kind of thing where we were communing with them outside of history. They represented a source of life for us in the sense that without the buffalo, we wouldn’t be the Lakota people, by mere fact that we wouldn’t have a food source.

Our relationship with the buffalo wasn’t just one-way; they weren’t just providing for us. We managed those herds; we cleared out the land for pasture. We would burn it, to clear the landscape to ensure the survival of the buffalo nations. That is a very material relationship. There is reverence in our stories and our songs [for the buffalo], but I think those cultural protocols were created to prevent us from over-exploitation and from throwing out of balance that relationship.

The same could be said with water. We didn't use water for hydroelectricity. We had our own technologies, but it wasn't the same in the sense of thinking of nature as a dead object that could be commodified. I don't want to romanticize us as Indigenous people, but we did have a certain kind of relationship that wasn't perfect but was an attempt to seek correct relations with the non-human world. I don't think it's the solution, but it's a kernel of a larger solution to the current catastrophe that we're facing with climate change. Indigenous people have a lot to say and an important role to play in how we address these issues.

Serpe: I was really struck by one particular essay in *Standing with Standing Rock* by Elizabeth Ellis, where she sounds an optimistic note about the fire lit by the fight against Dakota Access Pipeline. She writes: "This fight forced non-Indigenous Americans to acknowledge not just the existence of real, modern, Native Americans but also that unresolved treaty claims and U.S. colonization of Indigenous peoples and lands are very current problems. Furthermore, the conversations about water rights, self-determination, police violence, and racism that the #NoDAPL movement fostered have also forged a new intersectional platform that applies Indigenous perspectives of settler-colonial nationalism to critique oppression across the United States." I wanted to ask you, as an organizer, about developments in Indigenous movement politics in the years since Standing Rock. But I also want to hear what you think about how seriously this budding North American left takes the issue of decolonization. Are there encouraging signs of coalition building, solidarity? What work remains to be done?

Estes: Everyone can point to Standing Rock, but they can't really point to what's happened after Standing Rock. When Indigenous politics enter the mainstream discussion, it's often facilitated by white racism—whether it's Elizabeth Warren's DNA claims or the MAGA-hat-wearing Catholic school boys taunting an Indigenous elder on the National Mall. People have those images in their minds, but they can't tell you the backstory behind it. They can't tell you that the incident on the National Mall was part of a very large Indigenous-led march to remember missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW). Or the fact that, as explained on Rebecca Nagle's *This Land* podcast, there's a longstanding tradition of white Oklahomans who are white supremacists claiming to be Indigenous or part of the Cherokee nation to take Native land. The media want these juicy topics, but they remove the historical context.

That Elizabeth Ellis quote is spot on. I think it reflects across all the contributors to *Standing with Standing Rock*. Many of them are still on the front lines or have been on the front lines, battling extractive industries, battling for LGBTQ and Two Spirit rights in Indigenous communities and the mainstream, fighting for MMIW, fighting police violence to this day. Some of them are back home creating community gardens for people to use. It didn't stop at Standing Rock, it continues. Just because you don't see what's going on doesn't mean it isn't going on.

There is a critical approach that we can take to this movement. I've been asking myself this question for the last three years: why didn't Standing Rock arise into a broader national or international movement with clear political demands? Instead, we've seen the outcome of Standing Rock as getting several Native congresswomen elected. Which is good: it shows that people aren't all buying the Trump moment, that in this moment of white backlash you can get two Indigenous women elected to Congress who are liberals—I wouldn't say they're leftists!—with a host of other congresswomen who are somewhat leftist. That's a huge deal, but that was not the desired outcome of Standing Rock.

There's oil flowing through that pipeline, and there's talk of actually expanding its capacity. But it's not just about pipelines. People think that's all that Indigenous people do is just try to stop pipelines. That's a tactic among a host of strategies, long-term strategies, for restoring the Missouri River basin watershed, asserting our sovereignty in connection to those lands as well, to the point where

corporations and the United States government won't be able to just willy-nilly trespass through our land anymore. While there hasn't been a coalescence of a long-term, larger movement, there has been a lot of long-term thinking and planning. It's still very diverse and scattered right now.

The second question that you have was about the left. To be honest, the left has failed to take seriously settler colonialism, and not just Indigenous decolonization but decolonization in general as a platform. I've had a lot of discussions with leftists, socialists, progressive trade unions. People are genuinely interested; they're not hostile to it automatically. I think it's just that how we define class in this country, by traditional or historical elements of the left, essentially erases Indigenous people because it prioritizes the needs of settler society over Indigenous nationhood. They're often framed as competing systems. We've seen a lot of socialists and leftists asking about Indigenous reparations, which is funny because there's never been an overarching demand by Indigenous people *for* reparations. [The demand is for] land return. Anishinaabe scholar and intellectual Leanne Simpson said it best (I'm going to paraphrase her): settler society always asks us for solutions to these problems, but they don't like our answers, because they're really hard. It gets to the root of this society. It would be like going back to the nineteenth century and advocating for class struggle without talking about the abolition of slavery. It would be absurd!

The last two centuries have been defined by unrestrained, settler-colonial land grabs. Just in the last couple years, the Trump administration has opened up millions and millions of acres of "public" lands—even that name itself erases indigeneity—for exploitation, the extraction of oil and gas, mining, and so on. Everyone thinks that the major land grabs happened in the nineteenth century—but, in fact, the land grabs are still going on today. These extractive industries are linked from the Bakken region to the tar sands in Alberta, Canada, and Indigenous peoples have been making that connection for years. Because of Indigenous movements, now people are finally paying attention.

Naomi Klein says the Green New Deal is a kind of a laundry list of progressive movements, linking housing rights, rights to green jobs, and so on, to climate justice—well, if every progressive movement can be linked to climate justice, why can't every progressive movement be linked to decolonization as well? That's my role as an organizer. I'm trying to bring into conversation these various social forces that are advancing things like the Green New Deal to make decolonization a primary form of class struggle in the United States.

Most people think that decolonization would mean getting kicked off the land, or that Indigenous people would do to them what they did to Indigenous people in the past. It's a failure to imagine what a just future could look like. But it's also a failure to critically understand who owns the land in the United States and what the land is used for. Upward of 96 percent of agricultural lands are owned by white people, not Indigenous people. But these aren't just mom-and-pop farms out in rural South Dakota or Wyoming. These are large-scale industrial agricultural operations with thousands and thousands of acres of land. Ted Turner, the media mogul, owns 200,000 acres of our treaty territory alone. He has the largest privately owned buffalo herd in the world. Worldwide, he owns 2 million acres of land. Why is it that a single white man can own that much land?

When we're talking about land restoration, we're talking about the so-called federal public lands of the United States, but also about these large landholding capitalists. This is a conversation that we have to have in North America: who owns the land? What is our relationship to it? And what should that relationship look like in a future decolonized society? We understand as Indigenous people that we have to work with non-Indigenous people out of mere survival. Decolonization isn't an Indian problem. It's everybody's problem.

Serpe: In *Our History Is the Future*, you write: "Each struggle had adopted essential features of

previous traditions of Indigenous resistance, while creating new tactics and visions to address the present reality, and, consequently, projected Indigenous liberation into the future. Trauma played a major role. But if we oversimplify Indigenous peoples as perpetually wounded, we cannot possibly understand how they formed kinship bonds and constantly recreated and kept intact families, communities, and governance structures while surviving as fugitives and prisoners of a settler state and as conspirators against empire; how they loved, cried, laughed, imagined, dreamed, and defended themselves; or how they remain, to this day, the first sovereigns of this land and the oldest political authority." These days there's a lot of discussion about "climate despair," or "eco-anxiety,"—a sort of traumatic encounter with the serious challenges right now to life on this planet, so I wanted to ask you about the long-term resilience of front-line communities facing violence and overwhelming political odds. How do you maintain a capacity to fight for a better life even in times of relative apparent quiescence, or when the balance of forces seems to be way out of favor? With so many people feeling overwhelmed by the scale of climate change, what can we learn from movements that coalesce around place, community, threats to everyday life?

Estes: Indigenous people are post-apocalyptic. In some cases, we have undergone several apocalypses. For my community alone, it was the destruction of the buffalo herds, the destruction of our animal relatives on the land, the destruction of our animal nations in the nineteenth century, of our river homelands in the twentieth century. I don't want to universalize that experience; it was very unique to us as nations. But if there is something you can learn from Indigenous people, it's what it's like to live in a post-apocalyptic society.

One of the positive meanings of the title of the book, *Our History Is the Future*, is that in times of great turmoil and destruction, people didn't just stop being humans. They didn't just give up. And while we think of resistance in many ways as a kind of act of defiance that's spectacular and militant, it also happens in everyday realities, in how we keep alive these stories. People still had children in times of destruction. People still raised families. They did their best to keep alive the nation through genocide.

The passage you read is a critique of a trend in Indigenous studies and Indigenous organizing circles to focus on trauma and healing at the individual level. It's not that people shouldn't focus on trauma and healing, but that it's been mobilized in this neoliberal moment to say that, once the individual heals, they'll be able to go out and be a productive person in society. That becomes the horizon of struggle: healing at the site of the individual. The horizon of struggle is no longer liberation. I think it's telling in this particular moment that healing and trauma discourse becomes almost an obstacle we have to overcome. It's a tool of governance in many ways.

Just look at what's happening in Canada with the reconciliation process. How messed up is it that the very perpetrators of that violence are now the ones who are going to remediate that violence, provide the care for those victims of violence? Hey, I'm sorry we kidnapped all of your children, sent them to residential schools, killed a lot of them, raped a lot of them, abused a lot of them. Now we're going to say sorry, but instead of actually giving back land or giving back the resources for you to build yourselves as nations, we're just going to provide the social services for you to get the help that you need from us. It's this mentality of crying on the shoulder of the man who stole your land.

That's reflected in the climate justice movement. We see the future in very bleak and pessimistic terms—that there is no future. That's the perfect articulation of capitalism. Frederick Jameson, wrote that "It's easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism." That's very much our moment right now.

I don't want to minimize those feelings, but at the same time I believe fundamentally in revolutionary optimism, which carried these traditions from absolute genocide and horror and the

Wounded Knee Massacre to Standing Rock, which was also absolute horror in many ways. There were people who kept that fire alive. That's the job of revolutionaries in history; we're cheerleaders of the movement, and we have a backward- and forward-facing perspective. We're trying to study our movements to see how these ideas stayed alive, for example, when COINTELPRO infiltrated the Red Power movement and destroyed it. They went international—took these ideas into the international realm. It was a survival mechanism that sustained us to the next movement.

The climate justice movement is very diverse, and it's all over the place. If there's one thing I can offer, it's to say: we know what it's like to undergo apocalypse. Our worlds have been destroyed in many ways, and we're trying to rebuild them, reclaim them, and reestablish correct relations. The severity of the situation shouldn't undermine the willingness to act. Not to act, to succumb to a kind of paralysis, of inaction, is itself an action. Not doing anything is doing something. Howard Zinn said it best: you can't be neutral on a moving train.

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