

# TO SURVIVE PANDEMICS, LOOK TO INDIGENOUS LIFE

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**F**or those who pay attention to American history, the twin crises of the coronavirus pandemic and racism in the form of anti-Black violence by police should sound familiar notes. While COVID-19 is a new disease, the death and suffering wrought by pandemics in the Americas, from smallpox in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to COVID-19, is well-established. That these negative consequences have disproportionately fallen upon Native and Black people is equally well-established. Similarly, the police and extra-judicial killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, echoing the earlier police killings of Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Atatiana Jefferson, and Philando Castile among many others, resonate with centuries of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous violence perpetrated on this continent.

### **Disease and Racism are Connected**

The two crises of disease and racism have long been interconnected. The received story of the conquest of the Americas attributes the success of the European invaders to the diseases they brought. What is often called the “virgin soil hypothesis” claims that Native Americans had little or no resistance to European diseases, thereby excusing the invaders by blaming the immune systems of Indigenous people. In order to account for the differences between these susceptible natives and the settlers, hierarchies of race emerged that could rationalize the actions of the settlers against those “lesser” peoples, both those dispossessed of their lands and those enslaved to them after the removal.

Recent scholarship, however, has pointed out that Native disease resistance was often no different from the disease resistance of Europeans. The displacement and destruction of Native peoples and cultures, driven by hunger for Native lands and justified by rationalizations of racial hierarchy, were what contributed to

conditions that made diseases harder for Indigenous peoples to fight (Cameron, et. al., 2015). Racism magnified disease; disease reinforced racism.

From this perspective, disease and race were instruments of what is now called settler colonialism, the process of colonization that aims to take possession of land and eliminate its original inhabitants, human and otherwise (Wolfe, 2006). The colonial practices of the United Kingdom in India, of France, Germany, Belgium and the UK in Africa, and of Spain and Portugal in South and Central America, sought to extract the wealth of colonized lands and return it to home countries. Colonizers in North America, Australia and New Zealand, by contrast, sought to stay and build new nations: democratic republics established upon a commitment to the liberty and autonomy of individuals. In what became the United States, this entailed commitments to eliminating Native people and building an economy on the work of enslaved people.

Whether the COVID-19 pandemic and the protest movement re-energized in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder are to be *crises* in the full sense of "turning points" or moments of "decisive change" (OED) is yet to be determined. The efficacy of disease and racism in maintaining the settler colonial system still in place in the United States to this day suggests that efforts to bring change within that structure, however well-intentioned, will only re-entrench the suffering and death they seek to ameliorate.

### **The Creed of the Founders, or the Wisdom of the Native Peoples?**

Philosophers, educators, and policy makers who believe that reasserting the founding principles of the United States in this moment as a framework for change may be making a critical mistake. It is, after all, this same framework that has served as the ideological

lodestar in this country, even as political, environmental, and trade policies opened the world to novel diseases and ensured that their impact would be felt by those at the bottom of the hierarchy of peoples and power. In light of this, it is perhaps time to look elsewhere for more effective tools of resistance.

Perhaps, as Luther Standing Bear (Oglala Sioux) wrote in his 1933 memoir, “it is now time for a destructive order to be reversed. . . . [I]n denying the Indian his ancestral rights and heritage the white race is but robbing itself. But America can be revived, rejuvenated, by recognizing a native school of thought.” (1978, 255).

Indigenous Americans have resisted and survived. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, a citizen of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, writes “[T]he survival of indigenous peoples everywhere, not just here in my homelands, but everywhere in the world, has been nothing if not miraculous. In the face of efficient colonial land theft, which has made us poor, the environmental wastelands caused by virulent economic interests, the attempted ecocide, deicide, and genocide brought about by the failure of one federal policy after another toward our peoples, we continue to say, *anpetu wi*, the sun, lives forever. . . . Every day, every glimpse of the sun reminds us of who we are and to whom we are related” (1996, 142).

The key to this survival has been a particular kind of resistance. In his book, *Our History is the Future*, Nick Estes, citizen of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, writes, “Ancestors of Indigenous resistance didn’t merely fight *against* settler colonialism; they fought *for* Indigenous life and just relations with human and nonhuman relatives, and with the earth” (2019, 248). Settler colonialism and its consequences are, as Patrick Wolfe concluded, “a structure not an event” (2006, 388). Likewise, Estes continues, “Indigenous resistance is not a one-time event. It continually asks: What proliferates in the absence of empire? Thus, it defines freedom not as the absence of settler colonialism, but as the amplified presence of Indigenous life”

(2019, 248).

What is “Indigenous life”? In part it is the recognition that the shared world of native and non-native peoples is a relational world where all its members—human and otherwise—are related and interdependent where the central relation is a matter of *place*. Glen Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene) writes in *Red Skin White Masks*, “Place is a way of knowing, of experiencing and relating to the world and with others; and sometimes these relations, practices and forms of knowledge guide forms of resistance against other rationalizations of the world that threaten to erase or destroy our senses of place” (2014, 60). In the context of place, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) holds that the central practice is “reciprocal recognition,” “a process of seeing another being’s core essence [as] a series of relationships,” a practice that is “*continual, and a way of generating society*” (2017, 185).

Indigenous life takes place in a moral universe (Deloria, 1999) framed by what Coulthard calls “grounded normativity,” that is, normativity framed by places. “Ethically,” in his tradition, “this meant that humans held certain obligations to the land, animals, plants, and lakes in much the same way that we hold obligations to other people. And if these obligations were met, then the land, animals, plants, and lakes would reciprocate and meet their obligations to humans, thus ensuring survival and well-being of all over time” (2014, 61). The response to settler colonialism and its crises—pandemics and racism—would be a “placed” response involving the recognition of obligations and relations. COVID-19, for example, was transmitted from animals to humans in a “wet-market” or some other similar venue where the relation of certain animals to humans was ignored (Maron 2020, Shereen, et. al., 2020). Similarly, hierarchies imposed by systems of race begin by ignoring reciprocity and mutual obligation of humans to other humans.

One might argue in response that indigenous resistance, in the

end, is no more than an assertion of the value of a particular cultural group. As such, does it not follow the same logic of the resistance carried out by people who refuse to wear face coverings despite health benefits to others, or those who rally to the Confederate battle flag in the face of Black Lives Matter protests? Are these groups not enacting their own form of “indigenous resistance,” against which we are forced back to the affirmation of liberal democratic principles?

The comparison of the anti-maskers and neo-confederates to indigenous peoples is not apt. It is predicated on the idea that advocacy for a “culture” is what is essential to both forms of resistance. But, as is apparent in Estes’s account, Indigenous resistance involves advocating for a way of life that acknowledges the agency of non-human beings and the centrality of reciprocal relations with others (including particular lands). Consequently, Indigenous resistance advocates for a view that recognizes and preserves differences as a condition of ongoing existence. Those who refuse face coverings and latter-day Confederates may appear to be advocates for a distinctive culture among others, but they are not, committed instead to a world of individual autonomy and white supremacy. To reject wearing masks as a political statement is the very opposite of recognizing one’s obligations to others. And the legacy of the Confederacy, with its commitment to states’ rights as first and foremost a means of preserving the oppressive institution of race-based slavery, cannot be fundamentally committed to genuine pluralism.

Indigenous peoples and their responses to settler colonialism should be neither dismissed as “ineffective” nor romanticized but engaged in order to collaboratively frame new responses to the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and anti-Black racism. Indigenous Americans have been speaking to the descendants of invaders for 500 years in an effort to save their own communities and find ways to coexist. The practices and policies framed by imported Anglo-European philosophies have failed to address the dual crises. If this

moment is to be a true turning point, these failures should be challenged not by employing “the master’s tools”—the long-standing commitments of liberal democracy—but instead by abandoning the liberal democratic project and taking up the tools that have sustained Indigenous peoples in the Americas and around the world.

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