

Philosophic Affinities: Indigenous Political Theory and Conservatism

Samuel Piccolo, PhD Student, University of Notre Dame

I. Introduction: Taiiaki Alfred writes of a “political and social stalemate in the so-called reconciliation project” between Indigenous people and the Canadian state. Leanne Simpson says that Western theories of liberation have “for the most part failed to resonate” with Indigenous people. Hopes are placed in parties of the left, but once in power there is little satisfaction borne out of these aspirations. My suggestion here is that this stalemate has a philosophic explanation: that Indigenous political theory has strong affinities with conservative political thought—that its critique of liberalism is pre-modern, not post-modern.

II. Metaphysics of Flux: There are deep similarities between the metaphysics of IPT and Pre-Socratic Greek philosophy. “Being enmeshed in the cyclical flux of the earth lodge...our lifeway required cyclical and rhythmical movements,” writes Simpson. James Henderson likewise argues that the aim of aboriginal jurisprudence is “to be with the flux, to experience its changing forms, to develop a relationship with the forces, thus creating harmony.” Simpson further connects repeated resurgence and flux with a creation story. In this telling, all the earth was covered in a great flood and is lost until a turtle offers to bear the weight on her shell, allowing for a return to life.

Strikingly enough, Empodocles uses exactly the same language, describing “earth dwelling on top of flesh, and the carapace of strong-backed and stony-skinned sea snails and tortoises.” Jonathan Barnes calls Empodocles’ understanding of the world as one of continual dissolution and fusion. Plutarch alludes to Heraclitus thinking the same way: “By the swiftness and speed of its change, it scatters and collects again—or rather, it is not again and later but simultaneously that it comes together and departs, approaches and retires.”

The Platonic break from the Pre-Socratic tradition can be at least partially understood as the permanence of his forms, permanent ideas that exist in modern liberalism. Laws and constitutions are made up of rules; bills of rights prescribe rights and freedoms. No such permanence in IPT. This is well evidenced in Alfred’s work, in which he points out a difference between the Christian commandment of “Thou Shalt Not Kill” and the Indigenous pronouncement: “Don’t Kill, Unless You Have To And The Circumstance Requires It.”

III. Natural Order: Without exception, the land is fundamentally important in IPT. Simpson writes, “The land, in Nishnaabeg thought and philosophy, compels us towards resurgence in virtually every aspect.” Alfred goes into detail about an Indigenous economy, saying that its primary goals are to “sustain the earth and ensure the health and well-being of the people.” And Murray Sinclair highlights how the Indigenous reverence for the natural world means that “human interests are not to be placed above those of any other part of creation.” Such an emphasis in IPT goes back to Vine Deloria, who argued that the centrality of the land in is what differentiated IPT from western thought. Simpson similarly observes a stark divergence between Indigenous ideas of living on the land and the Western idea of “sustainable development,” which merely seeks to find ways to continue consumption.

A stark divide between IPT and modern liberalism seems clear enough, but this changes if we look at different, anti-liberal western thinkers. Johan Herder, for one, helped spark the tradition of German Romanticism with his land-centred philosophy. “Whom nature separated by language, customs, character, let no man artificially join together with chemistry,” he wrote. Isaiah Berlin spoke of Berlin’s world as one “organic, dynamic, and unitary: every ingredient of it is at once unique, and interwoven with every other by an infinite variety of relationships. Herder was not exactly a conservative, but it is clear how his writings began a tradition that became very much so. The “völkisch” writers in the early 20th century, as Michael Zimmerman writes, were “Repelled by the egotistical, commercial, and spiritless mentality of modern economic society,” and “called for renewed contact with the natural and cosmic forces.”

Martin Heidegger, who Hannah Arendt called the last of the German Romantics, lamented the losses that occur when people no longer live on the land. “The rootedness, the *autochthony*, of man is threatened today at its core!” It is no surprise that Heidegger so venerated the Pre-Socratics, since he values their truer sense of what it was to interact directly with the natural world, uninterrupted by the creations and constructions of humanity. IPT categorically rejects the modern conception of nature as something to control, and this rejection is prominent in the Herder-Heidegger tradition as well.

IV. Value of Tradition: One of the most egregious consequences of European colonization, for IPT, has been the loss of Indigenous political traditions. As Bob Joseph writes, the Indian Act’s replacement of Indigenous governance with Western, municipal-style administration, displaced governance forms that were less democratic in liberal terms—with some hereditary positions—but which adhered to Indigenous culture. Alfred explains a need to return to tradition. “We cannot preserve our nations unless we take action to restore pride in our traditions...Only by heeding the voices of our ancestors can we restore our nations.” In 1982, the Assembly of First Nations told the Canadian Government that its peoples rejected individual rights, since the Indigenous communal approach means “The Charter of Rights automatically is in conflict with our philosophy and culture and organization of collective rights.”

Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott, two canonical conservatives, both revered tradition and communal values in this way. “Under a pious predilection for those ancestors, your imaginations would have realized in them a standard of virtue and wisdom beyond the vulgar practice of the hour,” Burke writes of the French revolutionaries. Yuval Levin summarizes Burke’s thought, saying that for him neither the individual nor the large state “could be stronger or more effective than the restraints of habit and custom that grow out of group identity and loyalty.” Oakeshott stakes out his own position as one contrary to the liberal rationalist, who he says has “no sense of the cumulation of experience...the past is only significant to him as an encumbrance.” Oakeshott indicts the materialism of contemporary society, which he thinks is a result of losing a conservative ethic that is thankful for the given world. Like thinkers of IPT, both Burke and Oakeshott are concerned with the loss of communal traditions, and the forces of radical individualism that this loss creates.

V. Conclusion: I write as neither an Indigenous person nor a conservative; I speak to both groups, and for neither. My intention is to illuminate the potential for alliances where past prejudice has been hostility the norm. I see great commonalities between IPT, and, for instance, the approach of the Amish. All decisions in Amish communities are treated to the “same basic question: ‘Will this or won’t this help support the fabric of our community?’” The sort of Aristotelian communitarianism proposed by Alisdair MacIntyre, among others, is something that should appeal to proponents of IPT. Liberalism now appears far from hegemonic. IPT and conservatives alike can imagine a post-liberal future of return—or resurgence—to traditional ways of life, ones that take instruction from nature, tradition, and cohesive community, and allow them to live, more or less, *as they have always done*.