Knowledge and Education for Peoples’ Sovereignty

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Abstract: Sovereignty is important to many communities, including Indigenous communities which have a history of Indigenous autonomy before colonization. Living examples of people’s sovereignty can illustrate the path toward positive people-centered alternatives to control by the capitalist State, wealthy private land-owners and corporations. Efforts to undermine Indigenous and other peoples’ sovereignty have been deliberate and continue to take place in industrialized and “developing” countries. Yet peoples’ sovereignty has the capacity to unite and educate people in important ways. Many examples of education to promote people’s sovereignty are emerging, building on the knowledge that communities have generated over time and recognizing multiple ways of knowing. This is a very different educational model than the one most commonly recognized and implemented in industrialized societies. People working in higher education everywhere have the responsibility to educate our students about the history of colonization and destruction of peoples’ sovereignty, so that they understand the real history of their countries (including the influence of industrialized countries on poor countries), to build alliances with other educators globally, and to form bonds of solidarity with peoples’ movements.

Introduction

The ability of communities and regions delineated by a common identity to self-govern has eroded under capitalist enclosures of territories and nature. The ramifications are profound: territory and the ability to decide how it will be used, how people will gain their livelihoods, and even what they will eat and how it is produced affect health, well-being, identity and prospects for both present and future generations. At the most extreme, the loss of self-governance can result in death; this has been seen repeatedly through history as more powerful people have forced less powerful people to bend to their will. In capitalist societies over the last several centuries, nations or ethnic groups that have gained power have stripped less powerful groups of their lands, waters, culture, knowledge, and other goods without compensation. This theft has occurred through multiple nefarious routes: land-grabs and water-grabs; biopiracy; separating children from parents so that the dominant state can “civilize” or “educate” them; prohibiting the use of traditional languages, dress, dance, religious rituals; etc. This creates a vicious cycle of increased wealth and power for the already wealthy and subjugation for a group that was not able to resist effectively.

Today, many communities recognize and fight against this ongoing disempowerment. Recent international agreements including the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples2 (approved in 2007) and the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas3 (approved in 2018) frame the use of resources as human rights. The Committee
on World Food Security developed Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security⁴ (approved by the CFS in 2012), recognizing that governments and corporations that snatched land and resources from people using them were causing hunger and food insecurity. However, such guidelines and declarations are “soft law”, difficult to enforce even in countries that were signatories.

Communities that have resisted subjugation provide examples to the rest of the world of forms of resistance that are effective or ineffective. To the extent that there are ways to communicate across resisters, learning from other examples will help groups to be more successful as they fight for sovereignty. We define people’s sovereignty as localized control by a self-defined group of their governance system, including territory and food access. While there are many ways to share knowledge, in this article we are especially interested in educational initiatives designed to advance people’s sovereignty. We describe an Indigenous Survival School in Saskatchewan, peasant universities started by La Via Campesina, farmer-to-farmer education and other examples, pulling out the common themes and learnings that they provide. We also discuss barriers to the implementation of educational initiatives for people’s sovereignty.

Indigenous people’s sovereignty may come to mind first, in thinking about people’s sovereignty; violations of the territories and rights of Indigenous peoples have been ongoing for centuries. They have been rationalized by flimsy ideological statements such as the Doctrine of Discovery—the legal and spiritual concept first promulgated in 1493 by European imperialists but also used by colonizers in the United States, claiming that settlers had a right to colonize land held by non-Christian peoples—and scurrilous defamation of Indigenous people (they lack souls, they are not human, lands in which they live are “empty”, etc.). However, the loss of sovereignty affects many other communities beyond Indigenous, as a manifestation of relative powerlessness.

Increasingly in a world where many countries (e.g., Brazil, the Philippines, India, the US) have been taken over by authoritarian anti-democratic governments, acts of community organizing and protest—including by nonviolent means—have been criminalized. For example, in the US, 17 states have enacted laws since November 2016 when the Trump Administration came to power that restrict the right of peaceful assembly and 19 more bills are pending.⁵ Awareness building, documenting rights violations, organizing, and protest are steps in fighting for sovereignty. Where people face imprisonment or even death for these activities, resistance against the regime in power is fraught with risks. Criminalization and murder of people who are protecting their territory (lands and waters under traditional community management, whether people hold formal titles or not) are apparent around the world. Global Witness monitors protests against land-grabbing or water-grabbing by private interests, such as biofuel production by corporations, mining, gas pipelines, deforestation, freshwater extraction, and the theft of fishing rights. Their most recent annual report documented 164 killings in 2018 of land and environmental defenders, murdered for defending their homes, forests and rivers against destructive industries. The country with the highest number of killings in 2018 was the
Philippines (30), followed by Colombia, India, Brazil, Guatemala and Mexico. Global Witness claims that countless more people were silenced through violent attacks, arrests, death threats or lawsuits.6

Certain aspects of the struggle for Indigenous sovereignty are unique and these are relevant to the importance of education for sovereignty as a strategy for fighting back. First, Indigenous peoples are struggling to regain sovereignty that they had before invasion by a settler culture and may never have ceded, although it was stolen, unlike people who are oppressed by a more powerful culture yet have never known sovereignty. Second, Indigenous people remain second-class or third-class citizens in many countries, without the respect and recourses to protection of their rights enjoyed by settler populations. That is, they may suffer from two forms of oppression: first the subjugation of the country in which they live by an imperialist power, and second the subjugation of their own nation or community by others in that country during a postcolonial period. While there may be a celebration of independence to mark the formal end of colonialism, this internal subjugation does not end.7 And third, Indigenous people’s sovereignty has particular importance because of their ontology of relationships to land and other living organisms.8 In an era of massive environmental degradation, Indigenous views of other organisms as relatives, deserving deep respect, is a model of a healthier relationship than the exploitative one promulgated by settler societies. Many Indigenous people are guided by a sense of responsibility to their communities and the natural world. Humans are seen as the bottom of the chain of life, not the summit. Plant life and animals have the same or even more importance than human life because humanity is nothing without the natural world.9 The concept of wichitowin is prevalent: maintaining good relations and working for the betterment not only of humans but of all creation.10

Indigenous nations have led the fight against free trade agreements, notably with the Zapatista uprising when the first North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was signed in 1996. The appropriation of resources on Indigenous lands by nation-States has spelled extreme impoverishment and hardship for independent communities and has resulted in genocide, whether through direct violence or epidemic rates of suicide, especially among the youth who have lost hope.

A residual impact of the colonial experience is the personal, community, psychological and intergenerational trauma that is difficult to shake and not widely understood.11 Often there is a blame-the-victim attitude towards communities experiencing trauma and violence. Within neoliberal political systems, cuts to social programming and social safety have affected Indigenous communities disproportionately because of their poverty and lack of resources. A shortage of affordable housing and shelter, and lack of adequate nutritious food and meaningful employment, result in further suffering and isolation with psychological suffering. Gang activities have become global in nature as post-colonial realities, and are active in North American and Latin American Indigenous societies.12 One could say that given their dire circumstances, Indigenous peoples form the front line for organizing against neoliberal capitalism and the reestablishment of caring, nurturing societies that embody equitable and sustainable societies.
When settlers first arrived to the region known now as North America, Indigenous communities assisted them. Newcomers would not have survived the elements of very harsh climates without help. Domestic partnerships and working relationships occurred that resulted in new nations today referred to as Metis and half-breeds that are jurisdictionally distinct from Canada’s First Nations. Treaties were signed with First Nations across Canada and these treaties spelled out the terms of what both sides settled for. To date the conditions that Treaty Indians agreed to have not been fulfilled, exacerbating their poor quality of life and the appropriation of natural resources by settler populations. Federal and provincial governments parceled up traditional Indigenous homelands through the treaty process and later federal acts such the Natural Resources Transfer Agreement that unilaterally handed control over lands and resources in the three prairie provinces to provincial jurisdiction. Saskatchewan became a province in 1905 after Canada was opened up to new immigrants largely from Europe, after decades of colonial undermining of communities that included destroying the role of women, family and traditional economies.

The plight of land-based peoples is part of a 2018 Saskatchewan Food Sovereignty study undertaken by the Federation of Indigenous Sovereign Nations (FSIN), the political body that represents 69 Saskatchewan First Nations communities. FSIN interviewed trappers from northern Saskatchewan who described incursions on their traditional territories including their traplines, tracts of land that have been set aside specifically for trappers to harvest animals for furs and meat. Trapping is an important land-based cultural activity that respects the land and animals and represents a continued cultural expression. Trappers told stories of industries’ devastation of traditional homelands through mine prospecting, clear-cutting forests and damming rivers. In addition, trapping has suffered setbacks through activities of European-based animal rights activists.

In North America, Indigenous communities are pushing back in various ways through direct action and also through working within the system. The We su wetan community in North Central British Columbia (BC) have a permanent encampment on their traditional territories to protest and also protect their people from mining companies, deforestation businesses and industries that pollute and dam their waters. They are part of a BC-based Indigenous-led resistance to the Trans Canada pipeline that crosses the 49th parallel and has become a rallying point for a growing population that includes non-Indigenous.

**Educational Initiatives for People’s Sovereignty**

Education for people’s sovereignty proceeds “against the current”, often underground. It is characterized by participatory methods that are empowering, building knowledge of the real history of one’s place and how communities have defended it. Its pedagogical principles stand in stark contrast with the formal educational systems of industrialized countries, which train students to be docile parts of the wage economy rather than to criticize and analyze education as a social and political force. In industrialized countries, education is often
regulated and conducted by the State, according to laws that benefit the State and corporations rather than people. For peasant communities, state-sponsored education may be especially destructive because it reinforces the prejudice against people who work on the land, and encourages migration to cities. There is a substantial critique of dominant educational systems under capitalism, drawing inspiration and methodology from Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1968). Freire saw education as a pathway to liberation, when students are in dialog with their teacher to find solutions to problems and come to a critical understanding of reality. Such pedagogy is posed against the primary tools of oppression: conquest, division, manipulation, and cultural invasion.

Anderson et al. (2019), in an introduction to a special forum in Agriculture & Human Values on critical adult education in food movements, emphasize five principles of transformative learning which are applicable to education for people’s sovereignty: a shift from a commercial and individualized entrepreneurial model of training to a commitment to education for solidarity and care; valuing “organic intellectuals”, a concept originated by Gramsci to describe facilitators of learning who arise from within oppressed classes and help to unify theory and praxis; an emphasis on collective learning and cooperation; focusing on the intersectionality of different forms of oppression; and incorporating the regeneration of territorial relations and infrastructure required to meet human needs through local livelihoods. While this forum focused on food movements, there is considerable overlap with people’s sovereignty since control over people’s territory is fundamental to both sovereignty and food sovereignty. Thus, the literature on education for agroecology and food sovereignty interweaves with education for liberation. In an article focusing on peasant schools formed by La Via Campesina (LVC), Rosset et al. (2019) add the following common elements that go beyond a specific focus on agroecology: horizontal dialog among different ways of knowing and horizontal exchange of experiences; holistic integration of technical, political, ethical, humanist and internationalist strands of education; alternation between time at school and in the home community; recognizing that all elements of the pedagogical experience (e.g., reading time, collective meal preparation, field work, cultural activities) are part of a formative process; integrating political struggle; self-managed; and designed to form facilitators of horizontal processes rather than “know-it-all” experts.

We now turn to specific examples of education for people’s sovereignty from different parts of the world, to show how these principles are put into practice. The most extreme examples of enforced dominance of education by the State, and its use to eradicate people’s sovereignty, are the theft of children from their families and their imprisonment in State boarding schools, where they were forbidden to use their own language and customs. Indian residential schools operated during the darkest part of Canadian history and impacted largely First Nations, Inuit and also Metis (of mixed European and Indigenous heritage) students. It is estimated that 150,000 students attended and many died under horrific conditions. They were beaten for speaking their Indigenous language. Some children left home as early as four or five years of age and did not return for a decade or more. The Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission uncovered how children were physically, sexually and emotionally abused by nuns and priests while in their care. This Commission resulted in a public apology by the Prime
Minister at the time. Canada’s last boarding school for Indigenous children, the Gordon Residential School in Punnichy, Saskatchewan, was only closed in 1996. The period of residential schools contributed to much of the psycho-social dysfunction that continues to exist today.

Saskatchewan’s First Nations and Metis communities have a long history of working on education sovereignty and the promotion of well-being of their communities. Representatives from both Treaty and Metis communities have lobbied for their own education systems, resulting in the establishment of Indigenous educational institutes such as universities, colleges and other training programs. Examples include First Nations University of Canada, Saskatchewan Indian Technical Institute, Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre, and programs and departments within mainstream institutions, all of which confer university and college degrees and certificates. The University of Saskatchewan Indigenous Studies Department, the home department of one of the co-authors (Settee), is an example of forward thinking within higher learning, even though it is largely a non-Indigenous institution. Indigenous Studies was organized by a small group of Indigenous colleagues and allies in the early 1980s. The transition to educational autonomy since the 1960s has had a tremendous impact on the quality of education and the numbers graduating from schools, colleges and universities.

_Urban Survival Schools in Canada_

People leaving traditional and rural homelands in search of a better quality of life in terms of housing, services and employment gave rise to the urban survival school movement, which began in the provinces of Ontario and Alberta. Saskatchewan’s survival school—originally called Saskatoon Native Survival School, then Joe Duquette and now Oskayak High School—was established in 1981 in response to the extraordinarily high drop-out rates from Saskatoon’s schools. Much of the movement for survival schools was led by Indigenous women. Oskayak’s curriculum recognizes how people were affected socially and spiritually by Boarding schools and the erasure of Indigenous identity, and how to move forward from this devastation. To date the collectivities of Indigenous directed and controlled schools and programs have graduated thousands of primarily First Nations but also Metis and non-Indigenous students. It has been a long, steady and determined approach to what has been termed the “Indigenization of education”, which has meant the restorying of history based on orality, including adaptation of Indigenous teaching methodologies and integration of world views and concerns. These have been hard-won victories that have involved fierce battles with oftentimes intransigent forces. The battles have required the development of systems that support communities faced with structural unemployment and other forms of displacement from social norms. In some cases, victories have been realized as a consequence of solidaritous relationships with non-Indigenous, school board members and other government officials.

_LVC’s Peasant Schools_

A new global movement for food sovereignty, La Via Campesina (LVC), has arisen with many women and Indigenous small farmer leaders. LVC has become an excellent model for educating and organizing against the most repressive forces of neoliberalism. In many respects it puts women and children at the center of development, it enforces local autonomy, pulls into
questions the forces of globalization and seeks to create alliances among people and organizations with similar goals throughout the globe. In addition, it focuses on environmental degradation and works to save biodiversity which is disappearing at an accelerated rate. It also brings attention to the killing of frontline land protectors.

LVC, its regional secretariats and its member organizations have formed educational initiatives ranging from formal programs in ‘peasant schools’ to peasant trainings and schools without walls in Africa (Zimbabwe, Mali, Mozambique, Niger and other countries); Asia (Indonesia, South Korea, Thailand, India and others); and the Americas (Canada, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Venezuela, Chile, Brazil, Colombia and others).²¹ These programs are rooted in social movements, emancipatory political education, popular education, the concept of organic intellectuals and visions of the ‘new man’ and ‘new woman’. They recognize the need to unlearn previous lessons, re-imagine the future and assign new meanings to concepts as they encourage participants to become capable of mobilizing consciousnesses, resources and processes to transform their food systems and living conditions while strengthening their socio-cultural identity and sense of being historical-political subjects.²²

_Campesino-a-Campesino_

Among the peasant initiatives is ‘farmer-to-farmer’ education, which originated and spread through Mesoamerica as _Campesino-a-Campesino_ horizontal learning. This consists in part of visiting other farmers’ plots and learning by experience about successful practices. McCune and Sanchez (2018)²³ describe how _Campesino-a-Campesino_ practice first grew out of social reforms such as agricultural and credit cooperatives initiated in Guatemala by the Christian Democrat party and Christian Action. Peasant Leagues formed to resist peasant displacement by non-Indigenous settlers or mixed-race ladinos, and joined together to become a social movement demanding agrarian reform and respect for the Indigenous majority in Guatemala. Farmer-to-farmer education incorporates several of the elements mentioned above: horizontal transfer of experience; education in the field; intersectionality of oppressions due to race, gender, and poverty; and education designed to help participants become facilitators of continued education.

In Latin America, networks for popular education grew out of guerilla uprisings and State-inflicted violence in other countries. Millner (2017)²⁴ describes the close associations in El Salvador between the _Campesino-a-Campesino_ Movement, the renegotiation of space for autonomy, critique of top-down international interventions and restoration of knowledge about practices that would provide resilience to farm fields and communities. The network that she investigated was specifically devoted to permaculture, which emphasizes earth care, fair share and people care. Millner explains how the concept of Terra Madre has been used in El Salvador to signal how permaculture design techniques are being aligned with Indigenous histories and ontologies, in a reinvention of tradition.
FAO has recognized the power of farmer-to-farmer education, although its model of “Farmer Field Schools” (FFS) is not the autonomous bottom-up model used by LVC and its member organizations. FFS were initiated in Asia 30 years ago to introduce Integrated Pest Management in rice and a better understanding of complex agroecosystems. They consist of relatively small groups of farmers, small-scale livestock producers or fishers (20-30), supported by a trained facilitator, who meet regularly during the growing season to carry out experiments on farmer-identified production problems. They are intended to “promote empowerment beyond the field” and “foster social capital”. While they share many of the goals of popular education, such as enhancing critical analysis and problem solving and promoting collective action, they are under the management of FAO, which is unlikely to stray far from approaches and solutions that are consistent with integration into global capitalist food systems even if the FFS does rely on local knowledge and solutions.

**Greater Kurdish Freedom Movement**

One of the most dramatic and successful examples of education for people’s sovereignty has been in Rojava, where in 2016 the embattled Kurds created an autonomous state, the Democratic Region of Northern Syria (renamed as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria in 2018). The system of governance that they set up was unique in the Middle East: a confederalism with power devolved to the local level. Rojava’s constitution guarantees freedom of expression and assembly, equality of all religious communities and languages, direct democracy, term limits, the right to a healthy environment, and gender equality. At every level of government, men and women share positions; and women have fought the Islamic State in all-female militia. Religious leaders cannot serve in politics.

The Kurds created a radical educational system based on diversity, inclusion of all ethnicities and religions, feminism and ecology to solidify support for their new government. In contrast to Syria’s educational system, Rojava tries to foster respect between different groups in Syria and teaches classes in multiple languages. Students are educated about their cultures and histories, and encouraged to participate actively in discussion. The new education system has expanded to over 3000 schools with over 300,000 students in the Cizîrê canton, which is one of Rojava’s three cantons.

Rojava established its own institutions of higher education, separate from any political movement, for Kurds who were prohibited from attending the Syrian universities. Mesopotamia Social Sciences Academy and Rojava University were both founded in 2016 and teach classes in the local Kurdish dialect, Arabic and Syriac. Students learn about their cultures and histories at the Academy, as well as a range of other subjects at the University. In 2018, a Kurdish activist explained:

> We need to detach education, academia and knowledge production from corporations, the state, etc. and retool knowledge production to help us to be what we’ve been talking about. We are pulling academia more into activism and people more into intellectualism… We want to break the monopoly and avoid regeneration of the same pattern.
The Rojava project has been very threatening to Turkey and Syria, which have quite different governments and discontented Kurdish minorities within their borders. In late 2019, President Trump abruptly withdrew US troops from Syria, which had served to help protect their Kurdish allies. Turkey promptly responded with artillery and airstrikes against northern Syria, aiming to destroy the “most full-fledged democracy the Middle East has yet to see”.

Promotion of Education for People’s Sovereignty

It is clear that growing oppression and theft of territory and other resources has led to growing resistance and educational initiatives to train people in resistance, reinforce their socio-cultural identities, help them to understand the political and historical circumstances that have led to oppression, and encourage their creation of autonomous alternatives to subjugation. Efforts led by social movements have grown exponentially, but not always in close cooperation.

Education for people’s sovereignty could be enhanced by alliances across educators and institutions that allow facilitators and learners to share experiences and teaching materials to avoid each group creating materials from scratch, and to build on the most effective methods. Analyzing and comparing pedagogical approaches requires that researchers be able to carve out safe and independent spaces in higher education for research as well as education about people’s sovereignty and local traditional knowledge. It is important to recognize that there are important differences across regions in the safety of this endeavor: for example, in Mexico and Guatemala, given the lack of respect for Indigenous people, research is dangerous and peasant sovereignty is seen as threatening. In industrialized countries (i.e., colonial states), faculty who want to conduct research on people’s sovereignty often must assume power and make demands of administrators to teach topics perceived to be controversial or unnecessary. This can be facilitated by support from empathetic administrators and strategically securing positions on important committees that handle curriculum.

Part of the research and learning must investigate and help to break down the walls between traditional and Indigenous knowledge and science. Cultural reservoirs of traditional and locally-generated knowledge must be respected, and indeed it is far more likely than knowledge generated by outside ‘experts’ to contain deep understanding of the issues and circumstances that will constrain or enable local solutions. Breaking down the idea that some people think and some people labor in fields and communities is necessary to find genuine sustainable solutions, and is part of the pedagogy for people’s sovereignty.

Conclusion: The Future of People’s Sovereignty

At the same time that gains have been made, the majority of Indigenous and marginalized minorities continue to live with health inequity, violence, food insecurity, foster-children abuse, and other problems. Some governments are aligned with oppressors: for example, in the
Americas, Indigenous movements and organizers are under constant surveillance. Governments of former colonizing states are responsible for much of the oppression of Indigenous and minorities within their own borders as well as through the long reach of transnational corporations; they prefer to turn a blind eye to continuing abuse that is legitimated through free-trade agreements and development project that proceed without free prior and informed consent.

Although solidarity is extremely important, people who have been marginalized must claim their own sovereignty and understand their rights, history and unique identities. Others cannot solve their challenges, because they need to have control of whatever governance systems replace the system of oppression. However, international solidarity can draw attention to violations, impose sanctions such as boycotts, and push for an enabling environment for people’s sovereignty. Because of this, education for people’s sovereignty is needed globally. While this pedagogy is directed at encouraging resistance and building autonomy and self-respect among marginalized peoples, claims for autonomy can be realized more rapidly if there is broad understanding within former colonial powers of the massive suffering that colonized people have endured. Therefore, the citizens of the wealthiest and most powerful countries in the world also need to become aware of the extractivist and genocidal policies and practices that allowed wealth and power to accrue within colonizing countries, so that they can understand who has benefited from these practices and support calls for justice and equity.

Notes

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14 Personal communication to P. Settee, July 2019.
21 *Op cit.* Rosset et al.
25 *Food and Agriculture Organization* (FAO), ‘Farmers Taking the Lead - Thirty Years of Farmer Field Schools,’ Rome, FAO, 2019, p. 5.
29 Havin Guneser, during convening in Siena, Italy.
31 See McCune and Sanchez [2018] for a description of the lack of close relationships until fairly recently between *Campesino-a-Campesino* and LVC’s political-agroecological training schools.
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