

# Colonies and Capital

BY

BENJAMIN BALTHASER

The work of Native American activist Archie Phinney shows how Marxism can help advance indigenous struggle.

Considering the AFL-CIO's recent endorsement of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), one may be forgiven for thinking that we are living through yet another revival of the debate between indigenous rights and left labor activists.

The terms of the argument go back at least to the early 1980s, when American Indian Movement (AIM) cofounder and activist Russell Means delivered a speech to the International Survival Gathering in the Black Hills of South Dakota. It might seem strange that such a prominent figure in the struggle for Native American sovereignty would address a major speech on Marxism, but Means had a larger point: nothing in the European intellectual tradition — even its radical wing — interested him.

Marxism, in Means's account, would offer Native Americans nothing better than capitalism: both declare indigenous people and the land a cost of economic development. Marxism simply reorganizes a settler-colonial society's power relations based on efficiency. Native peoples live in "sacrifice areas," and any modern, industrialized society will need to extract fuel, surplus, and raw materials from their land.

A few years later, Ward Churchill elaborated on Means's point, stating that Marxists would conscript all indigenous peoples into their proletarian army in order to win their socialist revolution. It is, Churchill states bluntly, "why Marxism . . . tends to be dismissed rather harshly by the Indian population."

In more recent years, theorist Jodi Byrd suggested the same for twentieth-century Marxist political strategy more generally, arguing that Antonio Gramsci's theories of counterhegemonic practices only make sense if one wants to reinforce a "democratic multiethnic settler state," rather than provide for true tribal independence.

Anthropologist David Bedford did acknowledge that Marxism could provide a useful analysis in some anticolonial struggles, such as the fight to end apartheid in South Africa. In that case, Africans served as a reserve army of labor for white businesses. But, for tribes who may relate to capitalism outside of regimes of labor exploitation, Marxism, he argues, fails to account for indigenous people's unique claims of sovereignty and self-determination.

The AFL-CIO's endorsement of the DAPL would seem to support many of Bedford's, Byrd's, Churchill's, and Means's theories. While many labor unions have issued statements in support of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe's defense of their land and their treaty, the fact that the largest union federation in the United States backs the pipeline suggests that a basic fault line still divides the struggles of indigenous people and workers. "Development," as it's commonly understood, renders people and earth into abstract inputs; "universal democracy," the critique implies, renders all people as abstract citizens, flattening group rights and independent nation status for tribes.

Several theorists and activists have attempted to address the uneven history of the Left and Native American sovereignty in recent years. The widespread left support of the NoDAPL movement — including from America's most famous socialist, Bernie Sanders — represents only the most obvious example.

Historian and activist Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz has recovered the long legacy of the Latin American left's engagement with indigenous issues through the work of Communist intellectual José Carlos Mariátegui. And David Harvey, as well as the Midnight Notes Collective, point to the ways in which "primary accumulation" — capitalism's method for jump-starting growth by stealing and privatizing land and resources — is an ongoing and permanent feature of economic development.

Still, most assume that Marxism and indigenous struggles have little to say to each other. The former theorizes capitalist modernity and historical transformation, taking the industrialized worker as its subject. Treaty claims and land rights are, at best, secondary concerns in this tradition. As a result, Churchill's claim that indigenous people have historically been hostile to Marxian ideas generally goes unchallenged, especially in North America.

Yet Churchill seems to ignore the writings of Native American Marxists themselves and their own engagement with the long history of dialectical materialist thought. This gap is not merely an ancillary concern: it furthers cultural assumptions that, in Philip Deloria's words, Native Americans have "missed out on modernity." Such assumptions also suggest that indigenous people and socialists have little common ground, furthering the notion that there is a dangerous and intractable rift between the labor-left and the sovereign rights of indigenous people. This is far from the truth.

# Anticapitalist and Anticolonial

Archie Phinney, Nez Perce anthropologist and cofounder of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) — the longest-lived pan-Indian organization in the United States — remains one of most important, if least known, Native American intellectuals of the mid-twentieth century.

Despite, or perhaps because of, his wide-ranging writings — which moved from analyses of the Soviet Union's policies on indigenous Siberian tribes and articles on mode-of-production theory to books on Nez Perce oral traditions — his work has been eclipsed by other 1930s Native intellectuals, such as D'Arcy McNickle and John Joseph Mathews, who authored the first “modernist” Native American novels in the United States.

Phinney's work has not been fully collected or studied, at least in part due to the long shadow of McCarthyism in the academy: the most complete account of his life and work — a 2004 special issue of the *Journal of Northwest Anthropology* — spends a great deal of time trying to distance Phinney from his own socialist commitments.

And while Phinney's precise political allegiances remain unknown — for instance, whether he was a member of the Communist Party — it's clear that, had he not died suddenly in the late 1940s, he would have been called before the House Un-American Activities Committee and likely fired from his position with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

Pan-Indian, cosmopolitan, and self-reflexively modern, Phinney represents another strand of indigenous intellectual thought that avoids the stark binary Means and Churchill articulate. Phinney linked the fight for Native American sovereignty with other struggles for racial justice in the United States. He theorized that Native peoples exist both in- and outside American democratic structures, addressing what is unique to Native American politics while also acknowledging that indigenous populations are modern and must develop a political voice and political allies.

Phinney emerged as an intellectual at a time when much of the colonial world saw the Soviet Union and global socialism as a means of liberation.

As historians such as Mark Naison, Robin D.G. Kelley, and Penny von Eschen have suggested, the pluralist cultural and political movements of the 1930s intersected with anticolonial and black nationalist movements. They shared space in the same publications and often within the same organizations. As Naison and Kelley explain, after the decline of the Garvey movement in the late

1920s, the Communist Party (CPUSA) not only recruited former Garveyites, but in many ways took up the torch of black nationalism within the United States and much of the colonized world.

Beginning with the Sixth Communist International (Comintern) Congress in 1928, the Communist Party put forth a set of policies that would dramatically shape intellectual and political currents in the United States for the next decade. Abandoning “pure” class critique, the Sixth Congress built on Lenin’s and Stalin’s writings and declared anticolonial struggle a legitimate part of global revolution. It announced that the Comintern would support the liberation struggles of both “national minorities” within states and of subjects of colonial powers.

On the one hand, this policy followed — perhaps simplistically — the Soviet Union’s policy of self-determination within the former Russian empire. On the other hand, it opened the door for American party leaders to develop a self-determination thesis for the US Black Belt, declaring African Americans “internally colonized” subjects in need of their own state.

Perhaps because of the Left’s greater attention to antiracism, there seem to have been a small number of Native American party members who had, at least in regional chapters, a relatively high profile.

The West Coast CPUSA newspaper the *Western Worker* (later the *Peoples’ Daily World*) printed several headline stories about Native American activist Joe Manzanares in the 1930s; he also placed an advertisement asking for those “interested in Indian issues” to call a number at the San Francisco CPUSA office.

In addition, several letters to the editor from Native Americans articulated why they joined the party, combining the demand for self-determination with communist class rhetoric and anticolonial interrogations of the savage-civilized binary.

One letter, for instance, argued that “white bosses stole all the land from us Indians” and “they call us ‘natives,’ or ‘Indians,’ or ‘wild,’ . . . the Indians are not wild. . . . Indians are always friendly to workers who must slave for a living.” This writer suggests that entering modernity — being “not wild” — does not amount to assimilation. Socialism, described as “solidarity with the proletariat,” is reimagined as coincident with the writer’s claims to the land and his history of dispossession.

A 1934 letter by Vincent Spotted Eagle theorizes Native American life through mode-of-production theory:

Before the white man came, our mode of production and distribution were on a cooperative basis, without any exploitation. This is Communism, which is true Americanism. And this is why I joined the Communist Party.

Spotted Eagle declares capitalism an “original product of Europe,” writing that “we have been exploited” ever since “Columbus discovered this Great Nation.” Playing on the trope of “Americanism,” Spotted Eagle claims nation status for his own “Great Nation” as well as citizenship rights within the United States. His answer to European capitalism is not to go back to pre-Colombian life, but rather to find a new synthesis with “lovers of all humanity, especially the Negroes” through a transnational socialist project he refers to as communism.

At the same time, the *Western Worker* printed five stories about CPUSA members organizing relief drives and unemployment councils on reservations in California. In Montana, the party ran a Native American senatorial candidate by the name of Raymond Gray. This suggests that, at least in the West, party activists and Native Americans organized together.

While the extent and shape of these drives remain unclear, that the Communist Party had an organizing presence on reservations paints a very different picture of both the party and Native groups’ political engagement.

Further, the *Western Worker* ran numerous articles on illegal land claims, broken treaties, deportations of Native Americans to Mexico, and the “genocidal” policy of Indian Removal in California, suggesting that the party did not see Native Americans merely through the lens of class but understood the specificity of Native claims to injustice.

This archival evidence belies Churchill’s and Means’s critiques of the relationship between Marxist praxis and indigenous struggle, in much the same way Phinney’s writings on the Soviet “national minorities” policy helped him develop his own materialist theories of indigenous sovereignty. While lacking in the formal party infrastructure that helped vocalize issues of importance to African Americans, such archival evidence suggest far greater participation and involvement between Native communities and the Marxist left than is usually granted.

## Assimilation as Proletarianization

Phinney referred to the Soviet Union in a 1943 speech as “the first attempt of men to intelligently direct their own history.” This is not to suggest that he subscribed to Stalinist policy or was a card-carrying member of the Communist Party — indeed, as Michael Denning reminds us, focusing principally on party membership is not necessarily the best tool for analyzing radical movements of the 1930s.

Yet Phinney, who studied under Franz Boas at Columbia and traveled to Leningrad with a letter of introduction from Marxist-feminist Agnes Smedley, clearly saw the Soviet Union and Marxism like many other intellectuals of color in his day: as an alternative mode of economic development that didn’t rely on the European West’s racial hierarchies.

While earning his doctorate in Leningrad between 1932 and 1937, Phinney conducted a comparative study of US Indian policy and Soviet treatment of its national minorities, especially its Siberian hunting-and-gathering peoples. He hoped to find a model that the United States could emulate.

While Phinney never published a book on this topic, a close reading of his published and unpublished manuscripts suggests that his exposure to Marxism and Soviet policy would powerfully influence his subsequent involvement with the implementation of the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) and his career as a founding theoretician of postwar Indian activism.

Phinney’s most widely circulated essay after his death, “Numipu Among the White Settlers,” was written as he corresponded with Boas during his stay in Leningrad. In laying out the contradictions faced by the Nimi’ipuu (or Numipu or Nez Perce), Phinney argued that the false binary between assimilation and a return to the past doesn’t help us understand the Nimi’ipuu after their surrender in 1877. Rather, he relied on mode-of-production theory to assess the tribe’s current status.

As Phinney saw it, the Nimi’ipuu’s potential extinction could not be attributed to a single cause — and he made a point to highlight that they had survived their defeat at the hands of the military. Rather, the tribe’s “moribund” status resulted from a forty-year process by which “the Indians, having been lifted out of, or divested of, one culture,” were then “thrust into another one” — a foreign mode of life for which they had neither understanding nor the material resources with which to flourish.

As a materialist — someone who believed that culture is embedded in and produced by the necessities of social and economic life — Phinney was skeptical of cultural revivalists who did not also provide a political program of economic liberation. He recounts the Nimi’ipuu’s collective mode of production as inseparable from their cultural identity:

In the former communal economy, all activity was one continuous communal experience in which work (food quest and manufacture), ritual, and recreation were a single process. In subsistence production Indians had no conception of work as distinct from other cultural activity — there was not even a word for “labor” in their language. But with the abrupt transition from general collective participation to advanced capitalistic economy and individualism, they were confronted with a distinction between labor on an individualistic basis and their communal activity and recreation.

This contradiction, fundamentally between collectivism and individualism, now disrupted the tribal order, because material benefits were offered to Numipu people individually, without the requirement of work. The individuality of the Indians was developed, but not in consequence of individual enterprise and effort; on the other hand, the communal spirit survived and is expressed today in the form of the aforementioned recreational activities.

Phinney, believing that the Nimi’ipuu had lost control of their economic base, did not think “communal spirit” alone could overcome the tribe’s inability to produce its own livelihood. “The flashy regalia and vivid performance of Indians today satisfy both the white man’s taste for spectacular pageantry and the performer’s love for the spotlight,” Phinney wrote of Nimi’ipuu cultural celebrations, and yet “it must not be assumed that elements of Indian culture are being revived. On the contrary, this represents the last stage in the degradation of Numipu culture.”

Phinney was no cultural purist, but he felt that cultural celebration without a political or economic program did not signal a revival. Rather, it indexed the tribe’s assimilation into the racial politics of consumer spectacle. There could be no cultural solution without an economic one.

Phinney never argued that the Nimi’ipuu should assimilate their lives and work patterns to the settler-colonial economy. He never suggested — as so many others did — that they rely on job training, farming techniques, or educational opportunities provided by the white social order. Instead, he examined what *kind* of social order the Nimi’ipuu were being asked to join, arguing that participating in the capitalist economy as workers would merely mean “assimilation on the lowest level of white proletarian existence.”

Leaving the reservation and joining the working class would achieve “a condition wherein [the Nimi’ipuu] must face the adversities of exploitation and class antagonism,” trading the communal struggle against settler-colonialism for the individual struggle for bare survival. Phinney believed this would, more likely than not, make them worse off than they had been on their allotments and food rations.

Framing assimilation as “proletarianization,” Phinney underscores that sovereignty includes not only control over land, but one’s own labor as well. As he explained, for most workers, their conscription into capitalism begins with destitution:

There are today in the United States more Negro and more white citizens than Indians who are existing under inhuman conditions of misery and poverty; these non-Indians receive no special attention because they are unemployed proletarians and impoverished tenants and farmers — i.e., active components of capitalist society who are supposed to work out their own salvations individually — to live or die by their own efforts . . .

Phinney added, with characteristic acerbity, that “the US government feels compelled to rehabilitate [the Nimi’ipuu]” and bring them “up to the level equal to that of the average rural white family.” But that “average rural white family” itself needed a strong dose of “rehabilitation.”

In this passage, Phinney undermines the binary between “primitive” and “modern,” asking why a Native American would want to be assimilated into a social order that itself was fissured along race and class lines. The Nimi’ipuu have already had modernity thrust upon them — the real question is, what kind?

Rather than join the working class, Phinney called for Native peoples to fuse their tradition of communal ownership and tribal identity with the first principles of Marxist economics — “ownership of the means of production.” Native Americans, he suggested, should “make Indian groups economically self-supporting on the basis of cooperative (tribal) organization and corporate (common) ownership of the means of production.”

In this way, Phinney adapted Marx to an indigenous framework, suggesting that only a collective economic base could support tribal culture. Rather than calling for self-supporting indigenous communities separate from industrialized society, Phinney envisioned collective economic self-sufficiency “break[ing] down the barriers of isolation” and allowing the Nimi’ipuu to align themselves with the mass of “average rural white families” in working toward “new and better conditions of life” as “alert, modern communities.”

Phinney’s modernism emerged from his sense that life must be oriented toward social transformation. To try to revive the past, Phinney remarked, would be to live a “‘reservation’ existence of befeathered museum specimens” — to become the “vanishing Indian” whose outmoded ways retroactively justify the theft of Nez Perce land.



Yet he also realized that progress and modernity came at an existential price. For Native Americans, confronting the future also meant confronting the profound experience of loss, even of destitution, that resulted from centuries of disease and dispossession followed by colonial rule. Modernity, as he saw it, was therefore an unfinished project, the outcome of which would depend on social struggle.

## A New Indian Intelligentsia

Phinney sought work with the BIA when the agency was undergoing a profound transition. The 1934 IRA or “Indian New Deal” not only decriminalized indigenous culture and ended the government’s disastrous assimilation policies, it also created the first affirmative action program in federal hiring, recruiting large numbers of educated Native Americans into its administrative ranks.

Yet Phinney had his own vision of Indian self-empowerment, which expressed a greater skepticism of the American state than his subsequent decision to work for the government would suggest. Sending a long and critical letter to BIA leader John Collier, Phinney correctly reflected that the IRA “failed to break out of the rigid guardianship of the government” and fell dangerously short of the forms of sovereignty he outlined in his “Numipu” essay.

Objecting to the dominance of white anthropologists and missionaries at the American Indian Conference in 1939, Phinney formed a new caucus “limited to bona fide Indian leaders,” independent of Collier’s BIA. This group became the National Congress of American Indians.

A reading of Phinney’s published and unpublished writings reveals that he felt this pan-Indian organization could empower Native Americans to express a modern sense of self and have a political impact on the United States.

In an essay entitled “A New Indian Intelligentsia,” Phinney sketched out his vision of the NCAI. He began by calling on American Indians to radically transform their concept of their own identity:

Apart from any considerations of racism or nationalism, there must be ascribed to American Indians not only a tribal status but a racial status. The concept of an Indian “race” derives largely from our

modern propensity for classifying groups of people rather than individualizing them. Anciently, Indians identified themselves by local groups or bands, later by tribes and ethnolinguistic stocks, until now they have gained a distinct consciousness of that all-embracing classification — “Indians.” . . . This trend is already apparent among Indian tribes as it is among other minorities throughout the world.

Ever the dialectician, Phinney theorized that the imposed identity of race, like the imposed identity of the worker under capitalism, could serve as the basis for collective strength. Concerned that tribal identity could prevent Native peoples from developing wider alliances, Phinney stressed that “Indian racial heritage is not a thing that depends for its survival upon a reservation atmosphere. [S]uch nonreservation Indians are probably the most capable and aggressive element of the Indian population in the United States.”

Phinney’s last point seems telling. Rather than imagine, as Means does, that Native Americans who live in cities would be less politically conscious than those on reservations, Phinney argues that diasporic Native peoples are in fact the most politically active.

The NCAI, he believed, would function as the vanguard of this new, pan-Indian community. It would be far more “aggressive and militant” than earlier Indian organizations precisely because it acknowledged the modernity of the Native American condition.

Phinney’s turn toward racial affiliation did not mark a turn toward assimilation. The NCAI limited its involvement with white-led organizations, and its own membership was restricted solely to Native Americans. Indeed, the NCAI was so suspicious of white authority that any Indian working for the BIA could not assume a leadership position.

At its foundation, the NCAI ranked self-determination and sovereignty as its primary political concerns. The group would advance Indian interests at the national level, articulating a broadly Native point of view separate from tribal and land-based identities yet inextricably interwoven with local concerns.

The NCAI’s founders understood that their interests coincided with those of other people of color, yet they also saw Indian identity as a distinct form of belonging, emerging from history, treaty claims, and legal relationships with the federal government. In other words, the NCAI, thanks to Phinney’s visionary construction, used modern racial formations to function politically, yet it retained a sovereign Indian identity and purpose.

As the NCAI’s heroic struggle to end the disastrous “termination policy” a decade later would suggest, Phinney’s vision for a pan-Indian Congress came not a moment too late.

# “All The Real Indians Died Off”

Phinney’s life and work open up a set of questions about identity and praxis that still have purchase on the national imaginary about Native Americans.

As Dunbar-Ortiz recently articulated, the most persistent myth about indigenous Americans is that they have vanished, part of a premodern past that has inevitably, if tragically, come and gone. The notion that “Indians have missed out on modernity” has justified their erasure from history and the logic for their conquest. The little attention paid to Phinney only reinforces this.

Historians have tended to present him as either an Indian activist, uninterested in socialism, or as a “white man’s Indian” who adopted European ideas unsuited for Native life. But he was much more like other intellectuals of color of his day — concerned with colonialism, racial identity, and self-determination for his people in a global context.

His belief that Native issues should matter to the Left and that Marxism has a role to play in indigenous liberation does not make Phinney a lone iconoclast — rather, it places his work in a global context that understands indigeneity, land, imperialism, and modernity as part of a coherent historical conjuncture.

Phinney’s work suggests that modernity and Native American life need to be theorized together, and his ideas about what modern life may represent for all subaltern groups bears greater scrutiny. The questions he posed to the Nimi’ipuu apply to many groups that find themselves alienated, dispossessed, and exploited by capitalism: how to move forward as “alert, modern communities” that are “able to govern their affairs”? Equally, how do we transform the categories capitalism imposes upon us into modes of collective self-consciousness?

Phinney understood that capitalism has a global, totalizing logic. But he also realized that this does not mean all subjects’ oppression — or liberation — is configured in the same way.

He anticipated the largest, hemispheric pan-tribal gathering in many decades at the NoDAPL camp, and also saw that the fight to save the Standing Rock Sioux’s land, water, and treaty claims participate in a larger struggle over intensified resource extraction, primary accumulation, toxic racism, and the police state. Framing themselves as “water defenders,” the Standing Rock Sioux tribe both dramatizes the violation of their sovereign rights as a nation over their own resources, and connects them to a global struggle to wrest the foundational requirements of life, water, soil, and air from the grips of capital.

In much the same way Phinney writes about race, such a construction highlights what is specific to indigenous struggle, while at the same time connecting that struggle to a transnational call for ecological justice. Fighting for indigenous sovereignty does not distract from transforming capitalist modernity — it is central to it.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Benjamin Balthaser is associate professor of multi-ethnic US literature at Indiana University, South Bend. He is the author of *Anti-Imperialist Modernism* and *Dedication*.

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