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EDITORIAL

Indigenous Responses to Climate Change: From Climate Colonialism to Indigenous Climate Justice

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Abstract

Indigenous peoples have acted across a wide range of fields to address climate change. In all contexts they encounter the barriers of established colonial relations of land and state sovereignty. Indigenous-centred agendas are defined in articulation, with and against these dominant regimes. In this respect they are 'immanent', locked into in dialectical struggles for sovereignty. Such contestations are inherently generative: they force new issues onto the agenda, enabling transformation.

In this special issue, transformative possibilities are discussed across the carbon cycle: at the point of extraction and emission; the application of mitigation and renewables; carbon sinks and 'nature-based' solutions; adaptation and conservation; and issues of governance and influence.

Keywords

Climate Justice; Sovereignty; Climate Action; Self-determination

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About the Special Issue

This special issue of the Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Journal focuses on Indigenous responses to climate change. The five papers included here introduce key concepts that reframe climate action in terms of anti-colonialism, Indigenous sovereignty and futures on Country, and explain multiple ways that First Peoples in Australia are mobilising new and innovative approaches to the climate crisis.

Much of what passes for climate action ignores the colonial origins of climate crisis. Its solutions pretend that the world as-it-was, before the crisis was manifest, was a world that not only could be, but should be saved, as-is. Decarbonisation scenarios are imagined within a world that produced and still produces the climate crisis, but colonialism, or more accurately, imperial domination, is at the heart of the crisis we are facing.

Climate action that does not challenge the profoundly unjust world that produced climate change has the effect of affirming the colonial and neo-colonial order. Accordingly, for any solution to be effective, it must confront the colonial order head-on, not as an afterthought but as core to its transformative agenda.

Many of us involved in the Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Journal over the last several years have been in dialogue about issues of Indigenous sovereignty and climate crisis. Our discussions have explored climate responses in India, the United States, and Australia. In 2022 we, that is, James Goodman, Devleena Ghosh, and Heidi Norman, joined up with Kyle Whyte, Leah Lui-Chivizhe, Ruchira Talukdar and Kirsten Lyons. Over a zoom call in 2022, we shared our understanding of climate change as the latest and perhaps most devastating phase of colonialism – one that destroys the ecological basis of Indigenous culture more-or-less in perpetuity.

What became clear in our discussions is the extent to which climate politics assumes the colonial context and defends the recent past of colonialism against climate instability. As Naomi Klein argued (2016), the world would not be so uninterested in addressing climate change if climate impacts were mainly visited on the imperial world and its elites: inaction rests on centuries of imperial divides that ignore the needs of colonised peoples and make it possible to simply 'let them down'. Millions can be displaced by floods in Mozambique or Pakistan and not rate much of a mention; when a few thousand are inundated in the heartlands, such as Germany or Australia, it's global news.

As one of us stated, 'the fear of climate change is somehow tied to protecting certain taken-for-granted benefits'. Colonised lands and ecosystems are defined as dispensable sites for extraction, and as sacrifice zones for climate change impacts and climate change solutions. Indigenous lands are structurally vulnerable to climate disaster and are seen as resources for climate mitigation. In this context, climate action is a reiteration of colonial rule.

To overcome this colonising logic, climate action needs to recognise that climate change is rooted in the colonial order. Climate action must be reframed in terms of anti-colonialism and the articulation and expression of Indigenous sovereignty.

In our discussions we began to identify foundational aspects of Indigenous climate justice. We then examined these, using insights from our own research. The resulting papers, which have engaged others in a range of contexts, are the basis of this special issue.

Climate action and Indigenous Sovereignty

Agency sits at the centre of climate change. As with all social transformations, climate change is dialectical in its dynamic. That is, it is acted-on as much as acting-on social relations. It is evident in the process, in terms of what generates global warming in the first instance, but also in the forms of struggle and resistance that follow from it.

Contemporary Western climate action campaigns do, often, engage with Indigenous perspectives and recruit Indigenous issues to the cause. Campaigners are aware that alliances with Indigenous peoples, and alignment with Indigenous perspectives, can strengthen social legitimacy for climate action. This can be clearly seen in campaigns in the late 2000s that shifted focus from global climate policy to halting fossil fuel production on the ground. This anti-extractivist turn in climate advocacy highlighted the impacts of mining and fossil fuel production on Indigenous communities but generally did not unpack the colonial project which created the crisis.

As outlined by Heather Goodall (2008) in her analysis of Indigenous-colonial relations in NSW, colonialism takes radically different forms over time. In the case of NSW, where penal colonialism was replaced by variants of pastoralism, agriculture and mining, dominant forms of land use under colonial capitalism offered new openings for Indigenous peoples, while closing off others. The strategic accommodation of Indigenous peoples to these different forms of colonialism ensured ongoing relationships with Country in NSW, as it has in other parts of Australia. The pastoral industry became dependent on Indigenous labour, but the mining sector has hinged on (and manipulated) Indigenous consent to access resources on their lands. Such consent is also required for renewable energy projects, which risks extending the logic of climate colonialism in the process of climate change mitigation.

One of the key features of Indigenous societies is the capacity to maintain autonomy as a social formation, through and against genocidal colonial oppression. The narrative of 'Fourth World' survival, of peoples flourishing, despite Imperial invasion and displacement, present-day neo-colonial relations, and refigured Imperial regimes, is testament to the centrality of Indigenous strategy.

The current and upcoming logic of climate colonialism is only the latest type of genocidal regime to be addressed by Indigenous peoples. From this perspective Indigenous climate justice campaigners ask what climate action can do for Indigenous sovereignty, not how Indigenous perspectives can contribute to the struggle to address climate change. Foregrounding Indigenous agency and sovereignty in this way ensures that climate accounting is not preordained or predetermined by colonial relations, and provides opportunities, although these are critically constrained by the context of ongoing domination.

Deep dilemmas are embedded in struggles for Indigenous climate action. Some of these are familiar dilemmas of strategic accommodation versus outright refusal. Beyond this the socio-ecological logic of climate change can manifest as especially sharp 'moral hazards'. How can Indigenous people realise sovereignty when the rapid growth of greenhouse gas emissions and the resulting process of global warning threaten the very viability of their communities? Such hazards are inherent to climate regimes, especially as the impacts of climate change accelerate and force attention onto the immediate demands of adaptation as well as the longer-term goals of emissions reduction.

Some answers to this lie in a focus on locality. Finding the means of acting on emerging situations is an iterative process, but one that holds a key shared character, of the defended and expanded collective social-cultural connections to place and to land (what in Australia is referred-to as Country). The various dimensions of Indigenous climate agency cannot meaningfully be separated: they exist in relation to distinct places and reflect the socio-cultural relations those places convey and embody. Some aspects will be more important than others, depending on locality and culture, but the connection remains central.

This interrelatedness helps overcome the moral hazards of climate regimes: action to address impacts in the present is correlated with action to address underlying causes; locality centred action can advance sovereignty and contest climate colonialism at radically different scales, from the hand-held device to the struggles for global-level litigation. Locality, and connection to it, is the common denominator.

Immanent Indigenous Climate Agency

Indigenous peoples have acted across a wide range of fields to address climate change. In all contexts they encounter the barriers of established colonial relations of land and state sovereignty. Indigenous-centred agendas are defined in articulation, with and against these dominant regimes. In this respect they are 'immanent', locked into in dialectical struggles for sovereignty. Such contestations are inherently generative: they force new issues onto the agenda, enabling transformation.

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About the Papers in this Special Issue

Legal scholars, Lily O'Neill and Rebekah Markey-Towler, examine the significant climate litigation in Australia, in many of which recent cases First Nations people are playing a central role. They spotlight three cases: Tipakalippa and Cooper (both relating to offshore gas extraction, off the Northern Territory and Western Australia) and that of Gomeroi (relating to onshore gas extraction in the Narrabri region of New South Wales). Litigation has long been a strategy First Peoples have pursued in the fight for control over country. Recent climate litigation places this fight as a fight that all Australians benefit from, despite limited procedural rights and resources to delay fossil fuel projects and progress climate action.

Authors Heidi Norman, Therese Apolonio, Evelyn Yong, Calise Liu and Sharanjit Paddam describe the process of what they describe as 'knowledge exchange' when assessing the impact of climate change on Aboriginal land and futures on Country. They introduce a methodology for assessing the impact of climate change on Country and people, by overlaying Western actuarial models on Country. These models show the need for Aboriginal communities to plan for and adapt to the intensifying impacts of climate change to ensure long-term survival on Country and the protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage. Actuarial standards for climate risk assessment become more useful when they are guided by Indigenous knowledge and Aboriginal-led priorities and perspectives. This enables the development of local level climate action strategies. The authors identify the need for resources to lead climate change mitigation and adaptation that is informed by the past, present and futures on Country.

Energy policy academics Chris Briggs, Michelle Tjondro, Rusty Langdon, Sarah Niklas, Ruby Heard, Michael Frangos and Elianor Gerrard, share their study of the challenges, opportunities and policy options for increasing First Nations employment in renewable energy training and the energy transition. They nominate practical policy and program measures to improve outcomes for First Peoples in the energy transition and overcome long standing structural barriers. They nominate training and employment as a key determinant of whether the socio-economic position of First Nations peoples is improved through the energy transition. They caution against conventional approaches to labour market programs and instead nominate flexible and creative approaches, including measures that support industry to achieve targets and change the culture of workplaces, along with uplifted capacity of First Nations organisations to participate in the renewables sector.

Heidi Norman reports on the rapidly expanding interest across Aboriginal land councils to grow their land management and environmental regeneration capability. She identifies an overwhelming aspiration by local Aboriginal land councils to grow this work in the future. Interviews with representatives of land councils reveal an incredible dedication to working with their restituted land estate that fulfils multiple ambitions – to strengthen their people, create a better future, and repair their country that is enabled through the state response to the climate crisis. However, for the most part, Aboriginal landholders lack the resources to undertake the extent of work required to manage their existing estate. This paper speaks to the

enduring impact of colonisation on people and Country and the possibility of Indigenous-led climate justice that is underpinned by aspirations to regenerate relationships to place and sustain Aboriginal people as a collective group.

Finally, scholars Adam Fish and Elizabeth Thurbon introduce the concept 'Green Energy Statecraft' (GES) as a strategic approach to energy transition governance that attends to Indigenous climate justice. They highlight that the energy transition cannot occur without attention to the values, identities and priorities of Indigenous people because, in part, many projects will be sited on Indigenous land. They position energy transition as a new and critical moment in the history of modern states that sets the stage for wider innovations. These include addressing histories of Indigenous exclusion and economic marginalisation and reconfigured relationships between First peoples and the settler-state relations as one of negotiation, referred to as 'diplomatic disposition'.

Overall, the five papers offer critical insights into the emerging relationships between Indigenous Peoples and climate change. As with earlier waves of neo-colonial rule, climate governance is offering new openings that may enable some limited aspects of Indigenous sovereignty. Critical in this will be the capacity to define Indigenous agendas and priorities rather than be required to pursue objectives set by the governing structures. That space for autonomy, as clearly demonstrated in these articles, is itself critically shaped by the capacity for contestation and mobilisation.

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