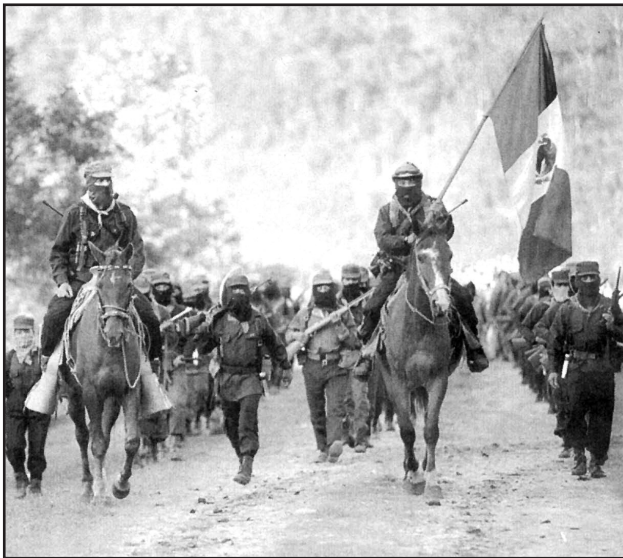


# Fighting Infrastructure and Colonialism in the Fourth World

## *A Strategic Indigenous Sovereignty Solidarity Model*

Perhaps the most neglected issue in progressive discourse today is that of indigenous sovereignty. This is an inexcusable oversight, for we will never be able to create a just or sustainable world without addressing the ongoing colonialism, imperialism and genocide inherent in denying indigenous people control over their own lands and destinies.



The violation of indigenous territory and destruction of indigenous cultures is inseparable from the other injustices that confront our world. It is no coincidence that even as cultural diversity and native languages disappear at rates unheard of in the history of our species, extinction rates have reached levels unseen since the demise of the dinosaurs.

While many pressing issues confront native peoples today, control of land is central to nearly all of these struggles. Governments and multinational corporations worldwide continue to launch new assaults on indigenous territory in order to secure access to the resources that their economies need to sustain themselves. These resources are then used to secure corporate control over the rest of the world, leading to many of the other injustices that progressives routinely (and rightly) campaign against.

By opposing the infrastructure of global trade — and its disproportionate impacts on indigenous peoples — we can not only show our solidarity with struggles for indigenous

sovereignty, we can also undermine the whole system that demands and enables the exploitation of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples worldwide.

### **Infrastructure: The First Line of Assault**

The word “infrastructure” describes the physical basis of an economy — the transportation, electrical and communications networks required for the extraction and movement of resources. Specific examples of infrastructure include highways, railways, ports, dams, mines, oil and gas pipelines, power plants, power lines and telecommunications cables.

The fundamentally colonialist nature of these projects is underscored by the fact that their supposed benefits rarely flow to local communities — rather, they are intended to move resources *away* and into the wealthy First World. To give just one example, the power generated by a series of proposed dams in southern Mexico and Central America is meant to be integrated into a massive electric grid and then sold to the southwestern US.

By no coincidence, new infrastructure — even in North America — is overwhelmingly slated for territories of indigenous or rural peoples. These territories hold two powerful attractions for modern colonialists, just as they always have.

First of all, Earth-based cultures tend to live in highly biodiverse areas, where there are still “resources” to be exploited (intact forests for lumber; intact land above oil or minerals; intact, undammed rivers). The second advantage is just as important: If members of traditional societies can be forced off their land by highways, dams or other such projects, they instantly become a cheap work force.

The Plan Puebla Panamá (PPP), an infrastructure megaproject for Mesoamerica, is explicit in this second goal, incorporating a massive belt of *maquiladoras* (export-oriented sweatshops) in southern Mexico, in order to “exploit the competitive advantage” offered by the region’s crushing poverty. Likewise, the extreme poverty on Indian reservations across North America cannot be separated from the systematic destruction of traditional subsistence lifestyles, coupled with the theft of mineral or other resource wealth by multinational corporations.

The dislocation caused by these projects is culturally devastating to indigenous peoples. One of the defining characteristics of an indigenous culture is its relationship with a specific place. When removed from that place — not to mention the built-in community support structures that had existed there — indigenous people's rates of health problems, poverty and suicide skyrocket. That's why the Dine' (Navajo) of Big Mountain, North America — forced to relocate to make way for cattle ranching and coal mines — have maintained for decades that "relocation is genocide."

Finally, infrastructure projects are devastating to native lands and health, from oil spills and hydroelectric dams destroying native fisheries to uranium mines poisoning the people and land.

Yet devastating as they are, infrastructure projects are in many ways only the shock troops that facilitate the ongoing assault on indigenous lands around the globe. Once roads have been punched into indigenous territories or electric generating capacity set up, for example, the way is cleared for an unremitting flood of missionaries, logging companies, biopirates seeking genetic data and stealing traditional knowledge, and a myriad other forms of destructive one-way contact with a colonizing culture.

### **Infrastructure's Wider Impacts**

Beyond its effects on indigenous lands, there is another powerful reason to oppose infrastructure expansion: these projects are essential in providing colonial powers with the power that allows them to invade indigenous land in the first place.

First World countries are dependent on imports, because their domestic production simply cannot meet their disproportionate consumption rates. With resources running out and consumption increasing, this dependence will only increase in coming years. But existing infrastructure is insufficient for the massive trade volume that *already exists*, let alone that projected from new free trade agreements and increasing demand. That's why expanding "international trade infrastructure" is one of the top priorities for business and political leaders throughout the hemisphere.

If we prevent these projects from being built — including domestic ones like Atlantica, Pacifica, the CANAMEX Corridor and the Corridors of the Future highway program — we cut off the global economic system's access to the resources it needs to maintain its power. Without sufficient resources and the infrastructure to process them, the colonial powers will be forced to contract their reach.

### **What Does Solidarity Look Like?**

The economic model underlying globalized infrastructure represents a fundamentally non-indigenous way of doing business. It is based on the premise that the land is meant to be exploited for short-term gain; an indigenous way, in contrast, emphasizes relation with the land over the long-term and into future generations.

All around the world, indigenous communities are resisting assault by these projects. They are defending their cultures against a global economy that insists that they assimilate, conform, consume — in other words, that they disappear.

Isn't it long past time for privileged North Americans to stand up and defend the right of indigenous people to remain indigenous? It's time for us to declare that "we want a world where many worlds fit," where people are free to *not* be consumers, workers or Europeans — and then suit our actions to our words.

On April 17, 2006, Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatista National Liberation Army said, "What we are preparing is an uprising... but one that will not end simply with putting in another [government] that is oppressing us. Rather, it will not end until we have destroyed the system that keeps us in misery; the system that wants to dispossess us of our land; the system that expels us from our country to seek work on another side; the system that wants to destroy nature; and the system that wants to kill us as we are—as Indian people, as farmers."

On the other side of an imaginary line, we too must wage an uprising. Or maybe it's the same uprising — because after all, the system that dispossess indigenous farmers also poisons our water and seeks to crush our own dreams of freedom and dignity.

And this is the truest meaning of solidarity: to stand united in the same struggle. To strive for our own freedom, even as we fight for the freedom of others to decide their own destinies.

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