

Commentaries and Discussion

Engaging Indigenous politics in a good way: A critical approach to decolonial scholarship

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Abstract

A significant barrier that scholars of Canadian politics face in engaging with Indigenous politics in a “good way” is challenging foundational beliefs about the character and content of “the political.” This includes refusing the naturalization of the existence of the state, discursively re-tethering culture to law and politics, and taking real material risks by putting theory into praxis. Scholarship within the subfield of Indigenous politics and the field of critical Indigenous studies offer scholars of Canadian political science meaningful inroads to address these structural and epistemic burdens.

This article asserts that engaging with Indigenous politics toward the end of decolonization and liberation, not simply inclusion, requires structural disruption, localized action, and a deference towards Indigenous knowledge systems. I identify potential sites of intervention in the field of political science provoked by the question “how might we engage with Indigenous politics in a ‘good’ way?”

Résumé

Un obstacle important auquel se heurtent les spécialistes de la politique canadienne lorsqu'ils s'intéressent à la politique autochtone de manière « appropriée » consiste à remettre en question les croyances fondamentales sur la nature et le contenu de « la politique ». Cela implique notamment de refuser la naturalisation de l'existence de l'État, de rattacher discursivement la culture au droit et à la politique, et de prendre des risques matériels réels en mettant la théorie en pratique. Les travaux universitaires dans le sous-domaine de la politique autochtone et dans le domaine des études autochtones critiques offrent aux spécialistes en sciences politiques canadiennes des pistes significatives pour aborder ces fardeaux structurels et épistémiques.

Cet article affirme que s'engager dans la politique autochtone en vue de la décolonisation et de la libération, et pas simplement de l'inclusion, nécessite une perturbation structurelle, une action localisée et un respect des systèmes de connaissances autochtones. J'identifie des sites d'intervention potentiels dans le domaine des sciences politiques, provoqués par la question « comment pouvons-nous nous engager dans la politique autochtone de manière « appropriée » ?

Keywords: Canadian political science, Indigenous politics, sovereignty, culture and decolonization, Indigenous knowledge

Mots-clés : science politique canadienne, politologie autochtone, souveraineté, culture et décolonisation, connaissances autochtones

Introduction

The so-called social issues that define contemporary colonialism in Canada stem from the same logic that underpins Canada's claims to sovereignty, the justification that Indigenous peoples are not human, or at least not human enough to govern themselves. The everydayness of today's colonialism is a relentless, exhausting force that manifests from within our most intimate relationships to our interactions with the more-than-human world. The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People (MMIWG2S) crisis has been characterized as evidence of an ongoing genocide (National Inquiry, 2019; Grant, 2021), anti-Indigenous racism runs rampant in healthcare (Turpel-Lafond, 2020), Indigenous children continue to be taken from their homes and communities and placed in a system that naturalizes their disappearance and death (Barker, Sedgemore, Tourangeau, Lagimodiere, Milloy, Dong, Hayashi, Shoveller, Kerr, & DeBeck, 2019); Roxburgh & Sinclair, 2024; Stefanik & Tait, 2024), Indigenous drinking water is disproportionately contaminated (Duignan, Moffat, Martin-Hill, 2022), and police continue to assault and kill Indigenous peoples with impunity (Bisset, 2021; Coyne & Nesbit, 2024; Wakefield, 2025).

These dehumanizing struggles with the state, its systems, and agents take place in the context of Indigenous hypervisibility and decolonial discourse, where Indigenous peoples are propped up as markers of progressive policy by institutions that have a vested interest in their continued oppression and dispossession. The scholars and scholarship that comprise the discipline of political science are embedded within these institutions and contribute to either legitimizing or delegitimizing the deadly status quo in Canada (Tully, 2008, p. 266; Asch, 2014). This commentary focuses on the discipline of Canadian political science as a space with decolonial potential. I suggest that engaging with Indigenous politics toward the end of decolonization requires structural disruption, localized action, and a deference towards Indigenous knowledge systems. You will find that the thoughts I share here, while not novel, aim to reflect patterns and themes expressed by Indigenous scholars, leaders, and community members across sectors, jurisdictions, and fields.

Decolonization is as much about the literal return of land as it is about transforming our minds, our relationships, and our worldview. It is about reconnecting that which has been severed by colonization. The 2024 student encampments established across Canada in support of Palestinians and Palestine reminded us of the extreme impacts of settler-colonial discourse. Narratives of terra nullius paired with neoliberal ideology and racialized myths of human development are active across the globe and in our own field of study (Borrows, 1999; Miller 2010; Ladner, 2017). Writ large settler colonialism is engaged as theory in the field and consequently is not something that is engaged substantially and with urgency by adjacent subfields. The students in these encampments challenge us to grapple with colonization in real time with the reminder that substantive efforts towards decolonization are unlikely to tolerate leaps from representation (such as that found in liberal scholarship and diversity, equity, and inclusion praxes), to consent for colonial violence, and back again. Instead, the process of decolonization, though varied, individual, and place-based, demands difficult work, expensive work, and the inconvenient exercise of working through the contradictions of each individual scholar's theory and praxis (Tuck & Yang, 2012). This article identifies potential sites for intervention in the field of political science provoked by the question "how can we engage with Indigenous politics in a good way?"

Traditions of critique

Similar questions have already been given some attention in North America. There are significant critiques of political science and its marginalization of Indigenous politics –Kevin Bruyneel’s (2014) “Social science and the study of Indigenous peoples’ politics” laments that despite the abundant and meaningful work on Indigenous politics in political science, “the problem is that even the best work on indigenous politics is still too often deemed to be tangential to and thus marginalized within the discipline” (p. 4). Kennan Ferguson’s (2016) “Why does political science hate American Indians” names an unwillingness from the field to engage Indigenous political thought, which he asserts “overtly oppose[s] many of the values that United States [and Canada] presumes: the legitimacy of majoritarian democracy, the primacy of sovereignty, the rule of law, and especially American exceptionalism” (p. 1029). Ferguson argues that looking to Indigenous legal orders, for example, would greatly expand the conceptual resources available to political science as a discipline” (p. 1029). These two pieces in particular gained significant traction in the field, although both emerged from the United States.

Domestically, Keira Ladner “took the field” and came to similar conclusions about Canadian political science noting that despite the uptick in Indigenous political scholarship there is a lingering “disconnect” between Indigenous politics and political science (Ladner, 2017). Bruyneel, Ferguson, and Ladner’s work suggests that Indigenous politics is an analytical litmus test for political science and state politics more broadly. More recently, Matthew Wildcat, Gina Starblanket, and I published an update on the subfield of Indigenous politics in the field of political science in Canada and the United States in response to Bruyneel and Ferguson’s prompts (Mowatt, Wildcat, Starblanket, 2024). There, you will find our take on the current condition of the field and an overview of the subfield of Indigenous politics, framed through the concepts of settler-colonialism, Indigenous knowledge, and sovereignty and authority. While this article takes on the discipline of Canadian political science and local political ecosystems more directly, it is entangled in similar analyses and is in deep conversation with the analysis we offered in “Indigenous sovereignty and political science” (2024).

At risk of overstating the role of political science, the discipline has a history of gatekeeping what classifies as political. Black, Indigenous, and scholars of colour’s critiques and conceptualizations of the political have been pushed into the margins of academia and the margins, in turn, have become a powerful place. What critical Indigenous studies in particular has taught us is that political science has deep commitments to Western epistemologies that make it difficult, if not impossible, for Indigenous political thought to be brought into the centre of our field (Mowatt, Wildcat, Starblanket, 2024; Simpson & Smith, 2014). But this isn’t just about shifting the centre of our scholarly work (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1993), it is also a push for re-grounding Indigenous political discourse, because “[t]here is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world” (Freire, 1996, p. 60). Our scholarly discourse improves, observes, documents, or obscures the realities of politics on the ground. Consequently, this article refuses to separate the discursive from the material because the narratives we support – implicitly or explicitly – legitimize or delegitimize a dehumanizing political project in settler colonialism (Tully, 2008). How might, then, the scholars and scholarship that comprise the field of Canadian

political science take up Smith's (2018) prompt to resist the field's "disciplining" in order to engage with Indigenous politics in a good way? (Smith, Tuck, & Yang, p. 7).

Sites for intervention

In my prompt to engage Indigenous politics in a good way, the concept of good is doing some heavy lifting. I write good in a nod to the local Coast Salish and Gitksan laws that I've been taught as a guest and wilp (a house within the Gitksan clan system) member respectively, as engaging in all our interactions with a good heart and mind, with reciprocity and relationality at the forefront. I present these approaches as ontological foundations rather than as portable morals. Equally, I engage the concept of good to denote what I understand as rigorous scholarship. As in giving Indigenous authority a legitimate place in your understanding of politics and the global political landscape. I write good as in allowing Indigenous politics to inform critical theory, but not allowing it to remain theory-bound. Good in the context of this article is about the substantive application of Canadian political scholarship, rather than an ethics of settler colonial and Indigenous thought. The concept of good in this article engages a refusal to allow Canadian political theory and praxis to rest on the foundations of dehumanization that justify state sovereignty. Echoing decades of Indigenous politics scholars, this article formulates a normative call to shift the field's cultural centre and confront the power dynamics at play at every stage in our scholarship.

The historic record demonstrates that the processes and standards for the substantive engagement I'm referencing cannot be located or produced within the Canadian legal and political landscape. While there have been meaningful, worldbuilding moments within and beyond Canadian courts and government boardrooms – including, for example, the 2024 Supreme Court ruling on the constitutional validity of Bill C-92, the 2024 Haida Nation's title agreement, the 2014 T̓silhqot'in title win, and the outcomes of the 1991 Delgamuukw case (though not the ruling itself) – they have been incredibly hard-won. In many instances Indigenous nations fought the Crown for multiple generations, faced financial ruin, spent decades sacrificing time with their families, and laid their most intimate politics bare to find some recognition from the state. Each win is worth celebrating on the face of such hardship, but the conditions of these wins demand Indigenous nations to wrest some limited jurisdiction from the state's presumed monopoly.

At its crux, this is a framing problem; a well-documented epistemological gap between what is and what needs to be to take Indigenous politics seriously. Audra Simpson (2014; 2020), Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark (2016), Manu Karuka (2020), Kevin Bruyneel (2014), and Kennan Ferguson (2016) all challenge us to focus our attention on the issue of sovereignty to start, if we take Indigenous authority seriously, state sovereignty can only be understood as a "counter-sovereignty" (Vimalassery, 2014; Karuka, 2020) to Indigenous sovereignty. They maintain that the state is countering claims against pre-existing Indigenous sovereignties. If the claim then is Canada's to make against Indigenous nations, the burden of proof is on Canada. And not against state processes of legitimation, in a position of counter-sovereignty state sovereignty be legitimized (or delegitimized) against the standards and processes of Indigenous nations.

One non-negotiable step towards engaging Indigenous politics in a substantive way is to take Indigenous sovereignty seriously. Not measured by state apparatus, the courts, international bodies, but understood as having its own processes for legitimation that are

distinct from the state and legitimate on their own terms. Cattelino & Simpson (2022) raise a similar challenge in political anthropology's shift to incorporate settler-colonial critique through the concept of sovereignty developed in American Indian and Indigenous studies, in which they observe that the "conundrum of sovereignty being an analytic for some (i.e., AIS) and not for others (i.e., anthropology) was indicative of political anthropology's focus on the elsewhere of colonialism, the state, and, later, the biopolitical" (p. 367).

Consequently, a primary target of intervention in efforts to disrupt a violent status quo is the vehicle of knowledge. Episteme is an obvious starting point anywhere that western ways of knowing dominate the discipline. The field of political science honours commitments that trivialize Indigenous knowledge, such as severing it from its deeply political context and positioning Indigenous peoples as "cultural authorities" or "environmental experts" whose knowledge is good enough to guide policy and inform environmental assessments, but not the type of knowledge that justifies any iteration of authority that might challenge or exceed state frameworks (Lightfoot, 2021). Indigenous knowledge systems form the foundation of any articulation or animation of Indigenous law and governance (Mowatt, Wildcat, Starblanket, 2024; Smith et al, 2018).

Indigenous knowledge represents the epistemological and ontological challenge that political science faces in efforts to reject the western knowledge hierarchy (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). Culture also informs knowledge, as part and parcel to Indigenous legal orders and political institutions, because our socio-cultural configurations are a blueprint for governance (Harris, 2000; Simpson, 2017). The beliefs, norms, values, and social structures that make us who we are cannot be separated from our political life. At the same time, the depoliticization and subsequent culturalization of Indigenous law and politics has been weaponized against Indigenous nations in Canada and has operated to undermine Indigenous legal and political authority (Starblanket, 2019). Recognizing the unbreakable connection between Indigenous knowledge, culture, and politics we are better positioned to heed the calls of scholars Ladner (2017), Bruyneel (2016), Stark & Stark (2018), Ferguson (2014), Turner (2020), and others to understand Indigenous politics - particularly the theory and praxes of sovereignty and authority - on their own terms.

This is a several hundred-year-old impasse that has not, and will not, be solved by subsuming Indigenous nations into frameworks that attempt – but in many instances fail – to undermine Indigenous authority. Despite the ever-changing format of these rights-based containers for Indigenous peoples, Indigenous legal and political authority exist beyond, within, and in a reciprocal (rather than top-down) tension with state sovereignty (Simpson, 2014; Wildcat & de Leon, 2023). This is our framing issue in political science. Who must counter whose sovereignty? Whose processes of legitimation do we engage? Whose law counts? Whose politics count?

Culture is law, culture is politics

This brings me to the role of culture. The culturalization of Indigenous politics has played a central role in the oppression of Indigenous peoples and Indigenous sovereignty (Kuokkanen, 2024). I define culturalization as an external, intentional, discursive mischaracterization of Indigenous law and politics as socio-cultural issues, marked by Canadian policies and laws that reject the underlying legal and political authority of Indigenous nations. It is an extension of the work to depoliticize Indigenous nations,

a foundational approach to managing Indigenous peoples. Culturalization is state-craft in the time of reconciliation politics, a move to recognize Indigenous law and politics as important cultural artefacts, not living authority. It is an iteration of overcompliance, defined by Lightfoot (2008) "...as [a state] that paradoxically takes actions that recognize specific rights or a category of rights that go beyond, or even against, that state's international human-rights treaty obligations or its normative international commitments" (p. 84) bound by liberal doctrines that ensure "...the possibility of a full nation-to-nation relationship between indigenous nations and states in a plurinational state is excluded, or at least diminished, as a discursive possibility" (p. 91).

Take, for example, the singular accessible avenue for Indigenous nations to resist incursions on their territories in real time outside of the courts: environment impact assessments (EIA). EIAs are not products of Indigenous authority, they are a mitigation tool designed by the state to manage both Indigenous resistance and environmental impacts of major projects. Movement toward Indigenous-led Impact Assessments addresses this baked-in colonialism, and decades of EIAs have indicated that,

"[t]he settler-state's limited understanding of Aboriginal and treaty rights often results in the dismissal of impacts on Indigenous Nations' rights as insignificant. Proponents of development and governments frequently argue that even if there are site-specific impacts, Indigenous Nations can continue to exercise their rights elsewhere in their traditional territory" (Keefer, Murphy, Wabegijig, & Stark, 2025, p. 506).

These rights have historically been understood by "[f]ederal and provincial governments ... [as] rights to hunt, trap and fish for sustenance", as traditions and survivance, not jurisdiction or authority (Keefer et al., 2025, p. 506). Similarly, treaty narratives provide an example of culturalization as a marker of the colonial re-narration of Indigenous peoples as rights-holding citizens rather than as political collectives with authority and jurisdiction. The process severs the "land question and matters of political jurisdiction" and as Starblanket asserts, "not only diminishes the status of treaties as political agreements between governments but also deterritorializes them" (2019, p. 449).

Land is also central to this discourse. When characterized as property, land is severed from its legal and political place-based Indigenous context and re-politicized in the context of state jurisdiction. That means that land isn't culturalized for everyone - it is explicitly depoliticized in relation to Indigenous nations. Indigenous nations alone are expected to engage with land in exclusively cultural ways. Land is then given new, different political meaning by the state. Put otherwise, land as property (not place) remains a pillar of state sovereignty. Canada's economy is dependent on secure control over territories because the state relies on natural resources extraction as a top performing industry. Agriculture, forestry, oil and gas, and mining have long dominated the Canadian economy and have become markers of the country's relationship to land. Considered "critical infrastructure" (Spice, 2018), Canada's key projects have largely been

safeguarded by the conditional recognition of Indigenous rights. Aboriginal title, for example, is embedded with the caveat of justifiable infringement, through which many forms of critical infrastructure are permitted to take place in violation of Indigenous jurisdiction for the benefit of the nation (Canada).

Without sustained access to resource extraction on Indigenous lands, Canada risks losing its economic power and corresponding claim to *de facto* sovereignty, through which the state makes its claims based on capacity and power over territories and people, rather than law alone (Beaton, 2018). Those in opposition to extractive projects have been differentially criminalized as domestic- or eco-terrorists (Preston, 2013; Spice, 2018). Land is the defining element of the jurisdictional impasse between Indigenous nations and Canada and represents the source of authority for both within their respective cultural contexts. The meaning applied to land denotes a primary point of distinction between Indigenous and state sovereignty.

This western understanding of land has also been inherited by Canadian citizens. When settlers interviewed by Eva Mackey (2014) were presented with the issue of Indigenous claims to land, they expressed feelings of anger, crisis, and anxiety. In Canada, these feelings run deeper than the common body-politic fractures in multiethnic states (Kymlicka, 2007). Rather, the tensions stirred up in settler-Indigenous land relations are the result of “centuries-long processes” (Mackey, 2014, p. 9) that conceal the incomplete character of state sovereignty and marginalize the survivance of Indigenous authorities. These processes – legal, political, and cultural – paint an effective picture of complete and settled state sovereignty that is reproduced within government, academia, and the body politic. Both structures and subjects contribute to the maintenance of this illusion.

Still, Indigenous culture is tolerated in Canada, and in some cases is even co-opted to serve the nation-state. That is, Indigenous art and culture have become representative of Canada’s diverse and accepting character while the Indigenous legal and political authority embedded in that culture is strictly contained. Indigenous culture is extracted from its legal and political roots for utilization by the state, which maintains its claim to sovereignty by refusing to accept that culture, law, and politics are inextricable from one another in many Indigenous nations.

Similarly, in political science, the subfield of Indigenous politics faces its role in the challenging work of restructuring a field built upon state-centric commitments and the marginalization of “Others” (Ferguson, 2016). While there is still much to be done, the work is already in progress and the field has made considerable strides in the past two decades with feminist and gender studies leading the charge against the discipline’s established norms. Nath, Tungohan, and Gaucher (2018) note that diversity has emerged as a descriptor of the critical analyses taking place beyond gender, but raise concerns with how the category is both “evasive and productive”, quoting Dhamoon’s observation that diversity evades “an analysis of white supremacy, colonialism, and racism” (p. 620). It is this type of analysis that works against a trend of “accommodating diverse Others”, as Dhamoon (2009, p. 242) notes in a critique of the norms in the study of democracy, and instead asks why the trend

is to “...theorizing an ideal version” (p. 242) of democracy rather than taking a critical eye to the work being done by state institutions and processes.

Most notably actualized through multiculturalist policy and rights-based frameworks, diversity has also obscured processes of colonization in government spaces. Cultural pluralism has played a role in the depoliticization of French and Indigenous nationalisms, which were “involuntarily incorporated” into the state (Kymlicka, 1998b, p. 217) and multiculturalism itself emerged out of a need to restrain Quebecois separatist movements and quell their political resistance (Trudeau, 1968). By discursively reworking their concerns into a multiethnic framework, the state foregrounds cultural continuity and language rights to restrain both French and Indigenous resistance. As such, Nath et al. (2018) argue that anti-oppression scholarship requires an analysis that takes into consideration the interlocking systems of power that concern each topic of study. Limiting the study of diverse groups to their position within the current dominant institutions without an anti-colonial, anti-imperial, or anti-racist analytic, presumes the state a permanent, if not superior, fixture. The marginalization of Indigenous self-determination in government and scholarship is not simply a consequence of the state’s inability to comprehend Indigenous authority, but rather is a reflection of broader state efforts to obscure Indigenous legal-political authorities.

In context, the field’s treatment of Indigenous legal and political authority reflects the Canadian government’s approach to Indigenous self-determination; the “cultural” is safe-guarded and celebrated, while Indigenous practices that threaten the authority of the state are suppressed. While multiculturalism has dominated as a topic of study in Canadian political science for decades (Kymlicka, 1998a), constitutionalism similarly binds Indigenous politics within rights-based narratives that are oriented towards culture rather than political autonomy. In constitutionalism, Aboriginal title is characterized as the singular forward-looking vehicle for Indigenous freedom in Canada, and has subsequently seen Indigenous culture prioritized over law and politics in courtroom developments (see, for example, the expansion on the content and limits of Aboriginal title in *Delgamuukw* and the corresponding and contradictory test for justifiable infringement by the state).

Complicity and Canadian political science

To resist these mainstream narratives of inclusion, Indigenous politics must break away from its historic trajectory within the discipline. In the 2021 presidential address for the Canadian Political Science Association Joanna Everitt traced this trajectory and demonstrated that despite an uptick in scholar diversity and diversity in topics, those shifts “[have] not yet notably changed the mainstream of what is considered to be political science” (Everitt, 2021, p. 762). Even with such significant change, Canadian political scholarship still rarely contextualizes Indigenous politics within their own knowledge systems. Outside of settler-colonial study, the culture foundational to western political systems, not least in its role to legitimize Crown sovereignty, also lacks context. Much like with Indigenous nations,

a discursive severance distances Canada from the concepts of *terra nullius* and the *doctrine of discovery* that provide one important justification for its existence: white supremacy. This obscures the way in which culture informs state politics via disavowal of the systemic culture of superiority that justifies the subsummation of Indigenous politics in the first place. The idea that the state exists outside of culture – or at the very least exists outside of white supremacy culture – as a set of institutions that serves only law and politics is a mythology that serves the status quo (Beaton, 2021; McIvor, 2023).

There is, however, a considerable point of irony in the efforts to culturalize Indigenous politics. That is, because Indigenous law and politics have been discursively depoliticized in the Canadian legal, political, and academic landscape for so long – bound in theory or deemed strictly cultural – many Indigenous nations have preserved their legal and political systems in plain sight. International relationships with the more-than-human nations, totem poles, feasting, and more – which function as both processes and markers of legal and political authority have been steadfastly maintained by many Indigenous nations. For some, this preservation happened underground at first, but when the potlatch ban was lifted, cultural activities (presumed by state actors to have lost their political salience during the ban) were slowly resumed and recovered. The mischaracterization of the legal and political processes of feasting, storytelling, song, dance, drama, and physical arts as cultural in nature meant that their resurgence not only became tolerated by the state – but in the era of reconciliation – culture has come to represent “soft rights” can that should be invested-in by Canada (Lightfoot, 2010).

It is only through state efforts to culturalize Indigenous law and politics, that concepts and processes critical to their structures become untethered from law and governance. In other words, Indigenous politics do not align easily with state politics in their true form – or with political science for that matter – unless they aren’t treated like law and politics at all. Untethered from things like “land” and “sovereignty” that make Indigenous politics a political issue for Canada, they are primed for inclusion within the Canadian legal landscape.

Efforts to legitimize Indigenous nations’ authority has often resulted in scholars identifying parallels between Indigenous governments and state institutions, characterizing Indigenous nations as federations, democracies, or monarchies. More commonly, legitimization is found through inclusion, by naming the various ways in which Indigenous peoples are included in the Canadian constitution, our representation in the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), and our authority in band councils. Flawed as they may be, the content of these comparisons is accurate; some Indigenous governing institutions share likeness with a federation or representative democracy, Indigenous peoples find representation in the AFN and other organizations, and Indigenous peoples have shaped and are included in the make-up of Canada’s constitution. But if we look instead to Indigenous authority produced within Indigenous knowledge systems, the legitimization of legal and political authority highlights an ontological and epistemological disjuncture between Indigenous and state politics.

While scholars debate whether our constitutional rights are an empty or full box,

McIvor (2023) points out, “section 35, as envisioned by the Supreme Court, is still a box”. In other words, the piecemeal protections Indigenous peoples secure through Aboriginal rights are always alienable. This alienability is arguably baked into the judicial process, within which “[t]he Supreme Court has worked hard, throughout its section 35 jurisprudence, to avoid outcomes that it worries would be too inconvenient for mainstream Canada.” (Wilkins, 2022, p. 288). The judicialization of Aboriginal rights thus far forms the overarching legacy of Section 35, in what McIvor (2023) has called a “translation test” wherein Indigenous governance must either translate into Canadian common-law, aligned with state processes and subsumed within the dominant political framework, or translate into depoliticized essentializations of Indigenous culture.

In Canadian political science, concepts like sovereignty might provide us the adhesive we need to discursively bond so-called Aboriginal rights to their underlying legal and political authority. The concept of sovereignty implies a serious - if not primary - form of political authority. In its western form, it is often articulated as exclusive control over a territory and people - sometimes characterized by the ruling government’s monopoly on violence. Sovereignty is also one of the primary concepts that Indigenous nations have used across the globe to assert their legal and political authority, I use it as described here:

Rather than tether Indigenous sovereignty to one static definition, we align with Moreton-Robinson’s (2007) and Simpson’s (2020) assessments of its foundational objective: the protection of Indigenous lives and the creation of Indigenous futures. With these objectives at the helm, nations define their own legal and political authority-making processes, rooted within their own knowledge systems. In law, anthropology, history, geography, gender studies, literature, and other disciplines, Indigenous sovereignty is employed as a marker of authority, agency, and jurisdiction relative to various scales and domains of Indigenous life ... Indigenous sovereignty, from this standpoint, is not a way of dividing up territory and jurisdiction but is a set of processes by which Indigenous peoples identify the sources of political authority from a range of knowledges that get reproduced in relation with each other and the natural world. (Mowatt, Wildcat, & Starblanket, 2024, p. 308).

The framing of settler colonialism necessarily focuses on the ways in which state sovereignty constrains Indigenous sovereignty, but Indigenous sovereignty also challenges and constrains state sovereignty (Simpson, 2014). Indigenous sovereignty is conceptualized and mobilized differently by Indigenous people and is unique in the place-based, relational objectives it serves. Articulating this difference is a challenge. While Indigenous scholars largely agree that Indigenous law and politics must be understood in their own cultural contexts, there can also be issues with distinguishing ourselves from the state if we don’t employ an epistemological challenge as a part of those efforts. For example, when Indigenous peoples articulate the incompatibility of possessive land ownership with indigenous life, their land-claims to Western states face an entrapment in which, articulated by Nichols (2019),

Indigenous "... 'dispossession' may be coherently reconstructed to refer to a process in which new proprietary relations are generated but under structural conditions that demand their simultaneous negation. In effect, the dispossessed come to "have" something they cannot use, except by alienating it to another." (p. 8).

This characterization of dispossession provides a stark example of both essentialization of Indigenous knowledge and the discursive severance of Indigenous culture from law and politics. If we are to engage Indigenous politics in a good way, it will be through the context of its own place-based knowledge systems. To do that, that which has been deemed cultural through severance by colonial discourse and/or Indigenous policy must be interrogated, and where necessary, re-politicized.

Structural disruption, localized action, and deference

The challenge to re-politicize is a somewhat foundational feminist and anti-racist approach to culture – the role of queer and trans people, women, and Black, Indigenous, and people of colour in many ways constitute the foundation of our society. And yet their – our roles – have been concealed in the process of centering white, cisgender, and heterosexual men in public governance. Politicizing the cultural requires recognizing the deeply political nature of what is perceived as our private worlds (Hunt & Holmes, 2015) – care, kinship, child-rearing, feasting, harvesting, arts, and the norms governing how we relate to one another are social, cultural, and more than anything, they are governance (Maracle, 1996; Simpson, 2017). The mischaracterization of private, intimate, and care-centric governance represents the challenge that Indigenous worldviews present to western models of governance.

There is no singular answer to what would denote a disruption of the status quo treatment of Indigenous politics in governance and scholarship, or to define in hard terms what substantive engagement might look like. Pan-Indigenous scholarship can obscure the place-based context required to address the particular iterations of colonization each nation and communities faces. Additionally, it is more difficult to measure impact at the broadest scales, international Indigenous rights development, for example, can become abstract when applied to settler states that continue to consider themselves exempt via the salt water thesis despite the passing of the *United Nations Declaration of Indigenous Peoples*.

One continuous recommendation from Indigenous scholars to counter abstracted engagement with Indigenous politics is to get familiar with your local Indigenous authorities (Harris, 2000; Deloria, 2003; Simpson, 2017). It is through slow, reciprocal relationship building with the Indigenous nations in whose territories we reside that one might learn the relevant place-based laws that have emerged from within localized Indigenous knowledge systems and timeless relationships with the land, waters, and more than human beings within those same ecosystems. Further, the Indigenous political scholarship reviewed in this article suggests that substantial engagement with the Indigenous-state jurisdictional impasse requires a deference toward Indigenous knowledge systems rather than an inclusion. Indigenous epistemes are not a tool of translation for Indigenous governance models, but rather provide evidence that Indigenous governance

cannot be meaningfully included within existing state frameworks for Indigenous-state diplomacy.

Conclusion

I have suggested in this article that scholars of Indigenous politics and the field of critical Indigenous studies have offered scholars in the field of Canadian political science meaningful inroads to address the field's structural and epistemic burdens. This article asserts that engaging with Indigenous politics toward the end of decolonization and liberation, not simply inclusion, requires structural disruption, localized action, and a deference towards Indigenous knowledge systems.

If we are able to recognize other knowledge systems, we are in a better position to critique the ways in which we – often implicitly, via our own epistemic commitments – participate in the depoliticization and subsequent culturalization of Indigenous politics, a far-reaching process that implicates each one of us in local and global colonization and imperialism. Scholars can start by recognizing their own bias by naming the knowledge systems that inform their work and refusing to accept white supremacy as a justification for contemporary political authority (Beaton, 2021). Substantial and rigorous scholarly engagement with Indigenous politics identifies first and foremost what must be resisted in order to participate in a good way, then moves on to practice.

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