

The ABC of Decolonization

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Contents

First: Settler Colonialism, “Class Struggle” and the Trap of Multinationalism	3
<i>Second: Racism is Trace of History. It Haunts Us; It Does Not Animate Us</i>	6
<i>Third: Decolonial and Abolitionist Futurity is Incompatible with Ongoing Settler Colonialism</i>	8
<i>Asking the Old Question: What is to be Done?</i>	10

First: Settler Colonialism, “Class Struggle” and the Trap of Multinationalism

The general practice of the white/settler/master¹ and “multinational” left(s), which have been embryonically instilled with an implacable eurocentrism, within the geographical confines of the northern bloc of settler colonialism² has been for some time to submerge the movements (and movings) of Native and Native-descendant peoples, as well as Black people, towards decolonial and abolitionist struggle underneath an amorphous class struggle. This struggle we are told pits a broadly defined, quite often de-racialized and de-colonized (but not *decolonized*), proletarian class against the capitalist class. This reduces the decolonial liberation movements of those nations and peoples territorially engulfed by the capitalist, anti-Black settler colonial network of the northern bloc to mere tendencies or sub-tendencies within larger multinational class struggle oriented organizations and movements (marxist-type parties of one stripe or another, anarchist federations and affinity group networks etc.).

Native and Black people have been, and still are, told over and over again by the eurocentric left that it is only through broader “class unity” with the white/settler/master working-class that we can achieve our goals of decolonization. We are told that once the white/settler/master-led proletarian marxist or anarchist revolution happens (realistically, “multinational” in the northern

¹ The reason why I almost always render the naming of this social category as a tripartite *white/settler/master* is that it is the case that within the geographical, political economic, juridical (and every other “-al” and “-ic”: libidinal, ontological, symbolic, epistemological, ideological, philosophical, sociological, historical etc.) terrain of the northern bloc of settler colonialism, where the white/settler/master colony is fully co-extensive with the anti-Black slave estate, that the ontological & structural positions of the Settler and the Master are effectively one and the same, notwithstanding the fact that they may have been at instances different individuals. Uniting them as settler/master centres this. Further, the addition of white to the pairing of settler/master also centres the fact that, while both Native and Black people have been imbricated in each other’s oppressions, it is only those who have been variously defined as “white” who have true and permanent access to membership within the white/settler/master fold, and also that, dialectically, the conjoined settler/master relationship is fundamental in the formation and understanding of what we call “white.” Conjoining all three of them consistently as white/settler/master also reminds us of the fact that whiteness is not just a relic or a ghost from the past, but that it is an ongoing social relationship, and that neither enslavement nor invasion were *just events*, but are continuous structures.

² The northern bloc of settler colonialism, or settler colonial northern bloc, are the places and territories claimed by the U.S. and Canadian states. Adam Barker theorizes the usefulness of this categorization, arguing:

An important consideration implied by settler colonial theory is that settler nations and states are merely different expressions of settler colonial space, no matter how strongly the idea of Canada or the United States as jurisdictions is socially endorsed and accepted. Thus it is necessary to actively avoid privileging the state system in settler colonial analyses (42–43).

This speaking of the northern bloc of settler colonialism or the settler colonial northern bloc, or just simply *the northern bloc* decentres superficial symbolic trappings of difference (flags, national anthems, nature of the head of state) between Canada and the United States, and instead centres how they are united juridically, economically, symbolically and ideologically, most especially at the level of their popular culture and civil societies. Additionally, I have come to prefer the use of the term “the northern bloc” over “north america” when referring to the settler colonial entity that occupies Turtle Island (rather than the land itself, which is, and remains, Turtle Island) as a way of side-linking from the colonial deference that is inherent in using the typologies and geographies that settler colonialism used, and uses, to cover Native lands and Native nations, through the names such imposed: the United States, Canada, North America, etc. In not showing deference to their imposed names, replacing instead with a rawly functional term like “the northern bloc,” the normative nature of settler colonialism within the symbolic, juridical and political orders of the state and civil society, including the nominally oppositional marxist and anarchist left, is stripped away and its basic nature and logics are laid bare. As Winona LaDuke (2016), and many others Native theorists, activists and scholars have long pointed out, there is a power of claiming inherent in the power of naming.

bloc has always been symbolically coded as such to disguise the underlying truth that it actually means “white/settler/master-led”) on this continent we will be able to secede from our geographic and physical engulfment within the empire if we so please.

However, it is essential to understand that the processes of colonization and decolonization has always coloured all of what we might broadly call the “class struggle.” This can be most concretely seen in the social positioning of white/settler/master workers within not just the settler colonial northern bloc, but indeed within the whole of the parasitic modern/colonial/capitalist world-system. Those within this category, while nominally members of a supposedly broader and ineluctably borderless proletariat are, by and large, embourgeoisified. This means that they are a non-exploited labour aristocracy, a pseudo-proletariat if you will, with a privileged lifestyle far above the levels of exploited and colonized nations of the world, both outside and within their imperial borders. While this is a controversial point for dogmatico-religious class struggle anarchists and marxists, who continue to be rooted in a political economy now a century out of date, it has been, in my opinion, quite conclusively shown by an array of theorists and writers. There have been a number of attempts to disprove this thesis—displaying varying degrees of ineptitude, abdication of basic principles of revolutionary analysis, and scholastic con-artistry, all fueled by dogmatic adherence to old ideas—but proof is not just in the numbers, but in the empirically demonstrable fact of 100 years and more of complete white/settler/master worker abandonment and betrayal of decolonization and abolitionary struggles within the northern bloc.

While there have been high tides of radical white/settler/master working class struggle, perhaps most vibrantly seen in the early work of the Industrial Workers of the World, even those movements failed to truly break with general trend of hegemonic labour movements within the northern bloc to ignore, submerge and derail decolonial and abolitionary movements arising from within the popular ranks of the territorially engulfed nations. Regardless, even that high tide ebbed nearly a century ago. Since then the white/settler/master working class has primarily functioned outright as a bulwark of colonial and fascist oppression domestically, and imperialist aggression overseas.

Both the failure of even the most radical expressions of white/settler/master labour organizing, as well as the broader historic trend of the white/settler/master working class to act as a reactionary bulwark is a result of their class aspirations, which are inherently petty-bourgeois in nature, seeking a greater slice of the imperialist pie, or, in the era of neoliberal globalization, to re-assert their position on the imperialist pedestal at the expense of the heightened exploitation and oppression of colonized people.

In the context of the settler colonial northern bloc specifically, the goals of the white/settler/master labour movement have always inherently trended towards the elimination of the Native population and the control and exclusion of Black people. This is in line with the general alignment of the white/settler/master working class with not only the global imperial project, but also the domestic settler colonial one. As the late Patrick Wolfe (2006) argued, settler colonialism is a territorially driven project structured around a logic of elimination (as opposed to a logic of exploitation or a logic of production) where Native people are made to disappear—either through the direct application of murderous violence, as in the celebrated tradition of frontier homicide, or, in the post-frontier period (marked by the end of the so-called “Indian Wars) through various other means such as biological and cultural assimilation—so that territory may be dispossessed and made ripe for settlement.

As Wolfe further notes, “[r]ather than something separate or running counter to the colonial state, the irregular activities of the frontier rabble constitute its principal means of expansion” (2016: 41). Because of this, from the perspective of Native and Black peoples, it is difficult to tease apart the broad white/settler/master population, including its lowest strata, from the anti-Black settler colonial state itself, precisely because the white/settler/master population has always been the primary agent for expansion. This was true both historically in the era of direct frontier homicide and the enforcement of chattel slavery, and still is today in the twinned processes of biocultural assimilation and exclusionary territorial population containment.

This more accurate understanding and presentation of the mechanisms and impacts of ongoing settler colonialism—certainly truer than the general leftist undertheorizing which sees invasion only as an onto-historical event locked firmly in the past, with only ghostly residues haunting modern white society—must force us to dig deeper. It must force us in fact rethink not only the nature and position of class struggle as it regards our understanding of colonization and decolonization and abolition, but even its relevance to those movements. This is not an abdication of the importance of the struggle for a post-capitalist future and the necessity of the critique of capital in this pushing towards this, but rather an assertion that because settler colonialism, which is the primary mode of Native oppression, is importantly *prior* to the antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie around which contemporary class struggle orbits. Most simply this is because the colonization of Turtle Island is one of the two pillars that brought the modern/colonial/capitalist world-economy into existence, along with enslavement and oppression of Black people (this two processes being deeply intertwined and co-constitutive). As Patrick Wolfe put it:

[A]ll the ostensibly self-sustaining actors in liberalism’s individualist drama—the entrepreneur, the labourer, the investor, the citizen—turn out to be collectively reliant on the continuing violence of colonial expansion. As Manu Vimalassery has pointed out, the nations whose wealth was Adam Smith’s central concern ‘were in fact empires.’ Imperialism is not the latest stage of capitalism, but its foundational warrant (2016: 23).

Settler colonialism is fundamentally a project of the elimination of Native nations and sovereignty through various overlapping means. It always was, and always will be. What settler colonialism is not, is a project of the exploitation of Native labour. Settler colonialism will use Native labour while Native people exist, but the goal is always to ultimately replace them.

Dené marxian and Fanonian scholar Glen Coulthard aptly argues this point, noting that while we do have to contend with the disciplining of our nations and peoples to the whims of the capitalist market, and the indoctrination of our nations into the concepts of private property, possessive individualism, and menial wage work, our labour is largely superfluous with regards to the functioning of the capitalist economy. Rather, we primarily experience oppression and exploitation not in the form of traditional capitalist labour exploitation, as envisioned by both marxists and class struggle anarchists, but rather as ongoing primitive accumulation. In other words through the continued theft of our land and resources (2014: 12–13). A similar insight is made by Osage theologian George E. Tinker, who writes:

Our methodology must become much more open to categories of analysis other than the sort of class analysis that we have learned from marxist theory. As useful as the analytical tools of marxism have been over the past several decades, including our incorporation of it into liberation theologies, it may be time for theologians in the globalized Two-Thirds World to reckon with the europeaness of this mode of discourse and to see it as a liberal colonizer solution to colonizer

violence, after the fact. ... In fact, Indigenous peoples are struggling with existence in ways that are not and probably cannot be addressed by class analysis at all. Our oppression and the resulting poverty are not primarily due to any class analysis at all. Rather, they are rooted in the economic need of the colonizer to quiet our claims to the land and to mute our moral judgement on the United States' long history of violence and conquest in north America (2008: 23).

The point emergent from Tinker and Coulthard is a questioning of the ability of a mode of class analysis emergent from a European context to provide a meaningful perspective of settler colonialism and the modality and grammar of Native death under the weight of its structures? If our struggle is rooted in the question of land and the resistance of elimination/genocide, rather than the kind of labourcentric understanding of colonialism, exploitation and oppression that are the hallmark of class-struggle perspectives (both Marxist and anarchist), what does talk of "working class unity" mean to us?

The essential understanding to take away from all of this is that any *genuine* struggle for revolutionary struggle within Occupied Turtle Island, which must be not only communist, but also decolonial and abolitionist³, simply cannot take the form classically prophesized by Marxists and class-struggle anarchists of an antagonistic contest between an amorphous multinational "proletariat" at one pole and the bourgeoisie at the other. To put forth such an analysis, especially one that subordinates decolonization and abolition to orthodox notions of class struggle, is to deeply obfuscate fundamental processes and structures at work within the settler colonial context.

Second: Racism is Trace of History. It Haunts Us; It Does Not Animate Us

Understanding the role of colonial oppression, especially how it deeply complicates the class struggle, on this continent allows us to also put into greater perspective one of the major planks of the white/settler/master and multinational lefts: anti-racism. Most of the left on this land has waxed eloquent about the "origins of the white race," the horrors of racist police abuse and mass incarceration, the dehumanization of non-white/settler/master people in the popular media, the irrational fear of third and fourth world migrant people, and the general fact that the culture of the northern bloc is replete with common phrases of a profoundly racist manner. They have talked, and talked, and talked some more about how overcoming racist thinking on the part of white/settler/master, especially the white/settler/master working class, is necessary for genuine revolutionary organizing.

However, the point that they miss, again by abandoning the basic precepts of materialist analysis, is that racism is a phenomena of the imperialist-colonialist superstructure. What most of the left refers to as "racism" or "racist oppression" in the northern bloc is in actuality the super-

³ The reason I say *genuine* struggle for revolutionary social transformation must be not only communist, but also decolonial and abolitionist, is because, as I believe is emergent within this broader analysis, communism/socialism is in fact not antithetical to settler colonialism, but rather potentially fully compatible with it. Indeed, this compatibility is written into the programmes of the vast majority of the "multinational" Marxist and anarchist left who do not explicitly, clearly and coherently deal with the question of settler colonialism and of returning Native. In fact, perhaps quite cynically, I believe it is not within the collective intentions of the white/settler/master dominated left of the settler colonial northern bloc to effect the transference of the land back to Native nations. Indeed as Tinker foresees: "our land will still not be ours but would enter into the collective possession of a much larger colonizer proletariat who are also foreign to our land and must be considered invaders" (2008: 23-24).

structural element of colonial oppression, which is a real, materialist relationship between the masses of the territorially engulfed colonies and the white/settler/master nation. This is why Wolfe referred to race as a “trace of colonial history” (2016). Racism is the ideas in the minds of most of white/settler/master garrison that have arisen from the material conditions of, and reflectively continue to justify, the colonial oppression of Native & Black People. In other words, we are not oppressed and colonized because they hate us; they hate us because we are oppressed and colonized.

The focus on racism and anti-racism on the part of the majority of marxist and anarchist organizations in the settler colonial northern bloc is an outgrowth of their holding to the faulty premise that views the conjoined settler colonial and slaveocratic empire as an entity with a unified class structure, with a singular proletarian class. Given that, as noted above, the white/settler/master working-class has, more often than not, been the most reliable shock troops of colonialism—being birthed on a pedestal built on Native and Black death—and acting as the principal means of expanding and consolidating the geographic body of the empire, the white/settler/master left, tethered to the always-already sinking rock that is the notion of a fundamental class nature of the proletariat as revolutionary, has had to seek a reason for this seeming contradiction between dogmatico-religious theory and the concrete reality of the world around them.

In this vein, they have more often than not come to rely on an array of somewhat brutalized set of extractions from gramscian and lukácsian understandings of hegemony and false consciousness to attempt to theorize their way out of this hard impasse. Leaning on these, they have put forward the notion that the development of white supremacy (white power is a better, more accurate, term) was/is an insidious plot by the bourgeoisie to fill up the minds of the white/settler/master garrison with false consciousness and their hegemonic common sense and normative values in order to break apart Black and white workers⁴ and thus disrupt a supposedly previously unified working-class⁵.

In essence this quite often boils down to a form of left-wing conspiracy theory. However, it remains important to address the fact that this kind of politics is profoundly obfuscating. The implications of the anti-racist focus in terms of revolutionary direction are two-fold:

⁴ Natives and Native labour are almost always entirely absent from these conspiratorial accounts of the birth of whiteness. This is perhaps because of some sort of subconscious marxist and anarchist recognition of what is argued elsewhere: that Native labour has always been superfluous to the capital accumulation circuit under the eliminative regime of settler colonialism. Natives and Native labour are absented from this temporalization of the birth of whiteness, even as during this period, as pointed out by Coulthard (2014) that this was the period (the frontier) in which Native labour *was* still playing a role in the concretizing of the modern/colonial/capitalist settler colony through the fur trade. Further, Natives during this period were often enslaved alongside Black kin. The absence of Natives within this kind of analysis is actually a deep, heavy presence which indicates a lot about the settler colonial myopia of the marxist and anarchist left.

⁵ This theorization is perhaps best demonstrated by the field of critical whiteness studies. While not all critical whiteness scholars and theories are cut from the same cloth, and indeed several are quite insightful and well worth studying—examples being Steve Martinot (2010; 2007) and David R. Roediger (2017; 2007)—there are also prominent examples of where this analysis is simply awful. The primary example of the former, which is widely read, cited and put forward as a keen and correct analysis by both marxists and anarchists is the late Theodore W. Allen’s two volume work on the “invention of the white race” (2012a; 2012b). An examination of the copious errors and misrepresentations within the text of Allen’s work would be far too many to outline in this essay, much less this endnote, but it is enough to say that he commits the mistake outlined in the previous endnote, and has been heavily criticized by many, less mainstream thinkers, for example J. Sakai (2014).

1. Because racism is normally placed within a context of restricted access to the largess of the empire, the macro-level solution is to open up the doors of the empire via a programme of radical integrationism;
2. At the micro-level the solution to the problem then is to combat the ideas bumbling around between the ears of white/settler/masters. Since racism is a superstructural problem then we must work to combat racist ideology. When that is done we can organize to achieve the macro-level goal.

This obscures the actual point of colonial oppression. Native & Black people suffer under the heel of a really-existing material relationship rooted in exploitation, elimination and the ongoing colonial expropriation of land and resources, the solution to which is to terminate those relations. In other words: decolonization. Not radical integration into the Klan fortress that is the northern bloc. While racist ideas in the brains of white/settler/master folks is a problem, it is not *the* fundamental problem. If Native & Black people are allowed to determine our own destinies then these malicious ideas become of secondary importance. Indeed they are likely to wither away relatively quickly once the tables flip and Red & Black Power become the order of the day, their material basis having been ripped away. As the theorist Frank B. Wilderson, III asks, and then answers:

What are the foundational questions of the ethico-political? Why are these questions so scandalous that they are rarely posed politically, intellectually, and cinematically—unless they are posed obliquely and unconsciously, as if by accident? Give Turtle Island back to the “Savage.” Give life itself back to the Slave. Two Simple sentences, fourteen simple words, and the structure of U.S. (and perhaps global) antagonisms would be dismantled (2010: 2–3)

Third: Decolonial and Abolitionist Futurity is Incompatible with Ongoing Settler Colonialism

This probably seems like a given, given what has been written above, however what I want to clarify here is that a genuine decolonial and abolitionist politics in the northern bloc of settler colonialism must abandon the idea that white/settler/master population has an inherent right to a piece of this continent in any way, shape or form. It's not that white/settler/master class struggle anarchists and marxists *explicitly* claim such a position, because they don't (at least not that I have ever seen), but it is implicit quite clearly in their various lines (other relatively superficial disagreements between ultimately similar ideological tendencies aside). Here I am not addressing those formations and individuals whose lines are entirely rooted in a politics of pure anti-racism, as how that position (radical integration into the settler colonial empire) leads to this point does not need much explanation; rather I am aiming this at those forces and individuals who have a political line that recognizes, on some level, colonial oppression (often alongside racism as some kind of dual racial-national oppression).

Most of the marxist-leninist and maoist formations within the northern bloc, as well as what would seem to be an increasing number of anarchists, put forth a sort of watered down recognition for decolonial and abolitionist struggle, though not necessarily for the same reasons. For both the marxists and anarchists who support, at least on paper, decolonial and abolitionist

demands, their lines are inherently weakened by their being subsumed under the rubric problematized by the first two sections of this essay. For marxist-leninists and maoists in particular however their political support for full decolonization is further weakened by a general non-recognition of the decolonial aspirations of First Nations. Many of these formations provide lip-service support to Black, Xicanx & Boricua independence, but tend to only provide vague platitudes when it comes to the question of First Nations.

Perhaps I am too much of a cynic, jaded by too many negative experiences working within and around white/settler/master-dominated marxist and anarchist organizations, but I believe that this is because they have a deep psychological unwillingness to confront the consequences of genuine Native liberation. From this their history vis-à-vis the Native and Black nations has been one of decades long false internationalism, parasitism and opportunism in their relations with the revolutionary decolonial and abolitionist movements that have risen to the surface at different junctures, and is directly rooted in their socio-economic positioning within the imperialist pecking order

Cynically, rather than in any kind of genuinely meaningful way, they can support Xicanx, Boricua and Black independence, only because while they would have to allow the succession of a few (though some quite large) swaths of imperial territory⁶, it is a scenario that leaves the bulk of the land in white/settler/master hands. Support for the liberation of, and return of land to, First Nations, as well as Michif and Genízaro kin, would mean the surrender of the entirety of the white/settler/master nation's land base. Indeed, this the reason that the white/settler/master garrison population exists at all: to physically hold down the land against the people from whom it was seized. This is also why the state enacts every kind of juridical tool at its disposal in order to head off Native land claims outside of a revolutionary situation.

The white/settler/master left cannot imagine a future where the garrison population does not continue to hold down the majority of the land of Turtle Island in a socialized/communized dispensation of settler colonial power. It doesn't matter if white/settler/master society is re-organized on the basis of a confederation of autonomous anarchist municipalities and industrial collectives, or a federative socialist workers' republic of the marxist sort: so long as the land is not relinquished back to its original owners then all that will develop is settler colonialism with a marxist or anarchist face. As such, it must be *not just* recognized that all of Turtle Island is stolen land, but that over the course of any genuinely revolutionary struggle for social transformation all of it must be liberated, and not just symbolically, even if that goes against the material interests of the white/settler/master population. The rights and aspirations of those nations that have been territorially engulfed by the expansion of empire will be given primacy.

⁶ This also says nothing about the increasing attempt to theorize from within those communities just what a claim to territory means regarding their responsibility to, and solidarity with, the First Nations whose land was the original theft that they are now claiming as a national territory. The debates are currently (as of this update in 2019) beginning to pick up particular speed within the more decolonially oriented movement sectors of the Nación Xicanx. An example of this are the recent debates the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicax de Aztlán (MEChA) on the use of the term Aztlán, which some of their regional grouping have begun to move away from. This debate—along with the shifting understanding of Chicax/Xicanx, mestizaje, Indigeniety and Mexican nationalism and machismo, and decolonial solidarity with First Nations—is excellently summed up by Nicolas Cruz in their article “Beyond Aztlán: Reflections on the Chicax Student Movement” (2018).

Asking the Old Question: What is to be Done?

So what does all this mean for the actualization of a genuinely revolutionary movement? To answer Lenin's old maxim of "what is to be done?" we must begin with a single basic premise: the return of land, all of it, and not just symbolically (to follow the specific wording of Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang [2012]).

This means the return of all land seized via treaty, the overwhelming majority of which are demonstrably fraudulent, and were never signed in good mind on the part of white/settler/masters. Many white/settler/master anarchists and marxists propose a line of upholding treaty rights, and the full application of previous agreements such as the Two Row Wampum as the vehicle for what they call "decolonization." However, this politic is a foil for the projection of settler futurity as a part of a decolonial and abolitionist futurity. It assumes that white/settler/masters have an inherent right to at least possess some of the land, which is in fact simply a more insidious form of settler colonialism. Further, the treaties and other similar documents are what removed thousands of Native peoples from their lands, sometimes marching them hundreds or thousands of miles to foreign lands, and sequestered all of us, even those of us who remained on ancestral lands, onto reserves and reservations. In short, the treaties are one of the basic juridical and textual means by which we were dispossessed of our territories and sovereignties. Thus, I would argue that all of the treaties must be scrapped, and the land returned that they were used to seize. Decolonization that is restricted to the open air prisons in which one is held prisoner is not real decolonization.

It also goes without saying that this process must also include the return of the enormous swaths of land (including, for example, the vast majority of so-called British Columbia) that were seized without even the slightest pretense of treaty making. Additionally the return of all lands to our nations which continue to exist, but which have no recognition from the state, or were written off as extinct, but whose existences have been continuous, must also be of the highest priority. This includes the lands of many nations in Waabanakiing and the southern Atlantic Coast.

We must also include, as one of our goals, the right of return for those nations who were pushed west into Wisconsin, Ontario, Oklahoma and other places by the manifest destiny expansion of the northern bloc. This means that the garrison population must surrender control of former Choctaw, Cherokee, Oneida, Lenape, Muscogee, Seneca, Munsee, Shawnee, Fox, Kickapoo, Seminole and others' land in the southeastern and northeastern woodlands, land to which they are tied to intimately by identity, language, spirituality and culture. Again, we must say that decolonization that is restricted to the open air prisons in which one is held prisoner is not real decolonization.

Finally it must also mean the negotiation, should our Black allies and kin seek it (something to be self-determined internally without any form of external interference), of a Black territory as part of the larger decentralized, bio-regional confederacies that will form in the wake of the breakup of so-called "north america." It must also mean reparations to the Black Nations for five centuries of slavery and colonial bondage.

These goals, once accomplished, would wipe out the material basis for the existence of the white/settler/master empire, which only exists by dint of genocide, enslavement and occupation. Only after all of this will it be possible to negotiate a future for the former occupying nation, and begin the necessary construction of a meaningfully postcapitalist society. Indeed, given that

the consolidation of the white/settler/master nation was dialectically tied to the colonization of Native and Black peoples, then the elimination of the material basis of the white/settler/master nation via anti-colonial struggle may well result in the dissolution of that entity.

Once all of these things are understood, of the primacy of decolonial and abolitionist struggle, and the fullest understanding of what that portends for revolution on this continent, will it be possible to claim that one has arrived at the most genuine possible revolutionary politics.

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