

Benign or Not: Neglected No More

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Governments in the United States, whether at the federal, state, or local level, have instituted treaties, laws, and practices toward many of the sovereign Indian Nations that can be characterized as benign neglect. Benign neglect of American Indian tribal reservations, largely due to mandates that restrict economic development, has effectively served to pull American Indians off their lands in search of economic opportunities that are unavailable on Indian reservations. In this paper, I assert that benign neglect of reservations in the form of energy denial is a practice aimed at removing American Indians from their lands and simultaneously subjecting them to assimilation. However, the unintended consequences by those responsible for benign neglect of Native Nations are actually invigorating Native power, rather than pulling folks away from their political homelands. This paper focuses on modern enactments of native sovereignty by examining the growing movement for energy sovereignty. It explains the environmental, economic, and political dimensions of renewable energy development on tribal lands. Energy sovereignty is one articulation of tribal sovereignty among a larger movement of American Indian empowerment, which includes movements for food sovereignty, land sovereignty, and economic developments between Indigenous Nations of the world.

Settler Colonialism: an Ongoing Process

Patrick Wolfe argues that settler colonialism is a process of “structural genocide” by which the elimination of the Native peoples of the colonized land is the ultimate goal (403). He further argues that settler colonialism leads to both “spatial removal and biocultural

assimilation.” Spatial removal is the physical displacement of an indigenous community, in order to get control of their traditional or current lands and resources, and without much consideration for where they will be displaced. Biocultural assimilation is the combining of two communities through being in proximity to each other – but because of the complete power imbalance between the dominant cultural holders and American Indians, when assimilation does occur, the dominant cultural forces attempt to absorb and phase out American Indian cultures, rather than mixing with and incorporating them. Wolfe’s argument implicates present-day settler colonial societies in perpetuating structural genocide and calls on dominant populations to end the ghettoization of Indigenous communities.

Benign Neglect as a Mechanism of Structural Genocide

Settler governments have practiced benign neglect against Native Nations since the advent of the reservation. Through the terms of treaties between many tribes as sovereign nations and settler governments, the United States has taken on the responsibility of providing adequate shelter, food, and resources to American Indian communities. This is one way to compensate for the loss of resources engendered by the removal of persons from tribal lands and relocation of American Indian communities onto lands that did not offer the same life sustaining resources. Legally, the United States has responsibility to American Indian communities because they are “domestic dependents” (Prygoski). While the “domestic dependent” status as seen by the United States Supreme Court has many limitations, precedents established by treaties signed in the nineteenth century continue to hold that the Native Nations’ access to resources are still the responsibility of the United States government. When it comes to access to energy, although the framers of these many treaties didn’t specifically include electricity in homes as part of the treaties, it is clear that as resource access develops in the United States, so should their duty to providing those resources to American Indian Nations. While I run the risk of essentializing a

group of people that comprises 567 different, culturally distinct tribes, it is safe to assume that the framers of these treaties were cognizant of the generations to come and intended for the protective conditions of the treaties to last until the traditional land, in its traditional richness, was returned to the Nation.

However, access to adequate shelter, food, and resources have not been provided to the American Indian reservations by the United States government. In fact governmental policies and practices have been robbing American Indian nations of their legal rights. These crimes have been labeled as “benign neglect” of American Indian reservations. Some of the typical reasons presented by the hegemonic power structures leading to benign neglect of reservations include: failures by governmental individuals responsible for delivering supplies, late shipping of supplies, failure to reach American Indian reservations in timely manner, and the remoteness of reservations being an insurmountable barrier to resource allocation. However, these are all excuses made by the designers of the structural genocide against American Indian peoples. With regard to the denial of energy access for all Native Nations, I argue particularly that the failure to build United States’ municipal energy grids out to Native Nations fully is not caused by their remote locations, but rather a mechanism in an effort to decrease the standard of living and economic possibilities on Native Nations, thereby luring American Indians off of their political lands.

While designed to remove American Indians from their lands and subject them to assimilation by the hegemonic population, the benign neglect of tribal lands through energy denial has actually energized a movement to enact tribal sovereignty through the development of renewable energy resources by American Indian Nations on their own lands. American Indian

Nations are generating their own energy in response to its denial by the United States, thereby strengthening their self-reliance and creating new visions of tribal sovereignty.

Energy Sovereignty: the Environmental, Economic, and Political Power

American Indians are often framed as inherent naturalists and environmentalists, known as the “Ecological Indian” stereotype, so it is important to articulate the full range of meanings behind and benefits from developing energy sovereignty on native lands (Willow 37). The “Ecological Indian” stereotype obscures the political and economic impacts of American Indian-led environmental action, thereby simplifying fights for environmental justice to solely focus on the environment while at the same time, reinforcing that American Indians aren’t fighting political disenfranchisement, challenges to sovereignty, or colonial structures. Therefore, I proceed with caution when looking at the environmental benefits of renewable energy development in order to ensure that the climate-centered benefits of renewable energy development don’t become the focus of the energy sovereignty movement.

Renewable energy development, instead of further damaging resource extraction and fossil fuel energy development, makes sense for many tribes, and has a wider positive impact around the world in that it reduces fossil fuel burning. While these benefits align with the “Ecological Indian” stereotype, they are just part of the total reasons why renewable energy development makes sense for folks on tribal lands, and Anna J. Willow warns that nonnative narratives of environmentally related movement often “highlight environmental grounds for action at the expense of equally important- and quite often inseparable – political ones” (Willow 36). The development of renewable energy resources make sense for many American Indian communities especially, because they have often been victims of environmental racism from the dumping of toxic waste on their lands and toxic resource extraction that rarely economically benefited the community and always generated environmental damage (Brookshire and Kaza

13). For example, uranium found in Navajo territory within Arizona, Utah and New Mexico led the United States to develop uranium mines there, ruining both patches of the environment, and the health of the exposed Navajo minors who were not warned or given protective gear while they worked (MacMillan). In reality, the benefits of renewable energy over fossil fuels are just part of the strategic reasons for energy sovereignty.

The second component of energy sovereignty is the economic growth opportunities tribes have when developing renewable energy productions on tribal lands. In a study conducted by Daniel Brookshire and Nikhil Kaza, two thirds of tribes who responded about renewable energy development stated that they were incentivized by business and economic opportunities to pursue renewable energy development. Tribes are interested in the economic opportunities of renewable energy resource development through developing renewable energy on their lands, through providing “green jobs” to people living on the reservation; technical training to tribal members so that the knowledge and functionality of the equipment can be maintained by members from within the tribe; and the potential for revenues from selling the unused energy resources to nonnative communities through the grid (Brookshire and Kaza 14).

The economic possibilities from the development of renewable energy on tribal lands are integral to the empowerment that comes from the energy articulation of sovereignty. However, these clear benefits of resource development on tribal lands have been stymied by nonnative developers and state and municipal governments (Rammos Castillo and Galloway McLean). Therefore, when entering into agreements with nonnative developers, tribes advocating for energy sovereignty are making sure to negotiate that the economic benefits and gross revenues return to the tribe. According to Robert Gough, a scholar, activist and attorney who serves on the Intertribal Council on Utility and Policy (Intertribal COUP), when his tribe, the Sicangu Lakota

on the Rosebud Reservation, proceeded with developing wind resource energy they “tried to jump through as many hoops as possible so that there would be fewer surprises later when interconnecting a bigger project to the grid” (Gough). In this statement, it is clear that Gough and the development team were mindful of the ways other tribes had been exploited by energy and resource development throughout the history of native and nonnative interactions. In articulating their concrete reasons behind renewable energy development, energy sovereignty advocates demand potential investors and co-developers to look past the “Ecological Indian” stereotype and see potential business partners working for the development of their communities.

Finally, for American Indian Nations, peoples and energy sovereignty advocates, the development of renewable energy on tribal lands is an opportunity for tribal empowerment. Energy sovereignty means that tribal powers are able to dictate the processes, channels, and outcomes of energy development on their sovereign lands – freeing them from the infrastructural and cost barriers to access to energy. Currently, homes on tribal lands disproportionately lack access to electricity. It has been found that “more than 14 percent of all Indian American households on reservations have no access to electricity, compared to 1.2 percent” of households across the US (Brookshire and Kaza 3). This disparity causes many American Indians to lose out on valuable resources that can strengthen and empower the contemporary community. There have also been cases where electricity companies have found legal loopholes and taken away electricity from tribal lands even though they are prohibited from such actions on non-native lands; such energy insecurity has caused death and tragedy, including the loss of an important and beloved tribal elder (Republic of Lakotah). For American Indian tribes, the ability to develop renewable energy resources on their own lands represents the opportunity to end energy scarcity

and insecurity by insuring that all homes have access to energy that is controlled by the people within the tribal community.

The political outcomes of energy sovereignty movement speak volumes about the continuing impacts of colonization. Many arguments for developing renewable energy on tribal lands look at how providing homes with electricity enables them to access Internet and television, which are “important to retaining younger people in the communities” (Ramos Castillo and Galloway McLean). This contemporary vision for the power that comes from energy sovereignty has more to do with the use of the environment to retain community members in culturally appropriate ways works to prevent relocation and resist assimilation. Additionally, the development of renewable resources on tribal lands insures stability for tribes, and insures them against failures of the electricity grids on non-native lands. Finally, the development of renewable energies, rather than fossil fuel energies on American Indian lands is strategic for the future, because it means that American Indian tribes who have developed these resources will be at the forefront of the cultural shift towards renewable resources when fossil fuels become too costly to extract or too dangerous to burn. Politically, the shift to energy sovereignty represents a huge empowerment for American Indian tribes and major reduction of dependence on nearby nonnative governments and companies.

Conclusion: Structural Genocide Thwarted

The energy sovereignty movement is just one element of the larger movement by American Indian Nations to articulate and enact their tribal sovereignty through political, economic, and environmentally beneficial moves toward self-sufficiency and cultural revitalization. The food sovereignty movement, as outlined by the American Indian higher

Education Consortium Student Congress, is focused on “the reindigenization of our food sources... to change the status quo when it comes to the sustainability of our cultures” (Ebelacker). In this articulation, American Indian student leaders call for food sources free from chemical engineering and diets that replicate traditional indigenous diets, as ways to decrease health issues in their community and to ensure food-sustainability within communities. The movement for food sovereignty privileges traditional ways of nourishment over the food provided to American Indian communities by nonnative sources, because the rise of diabetes, heart disease, obesity and premature death are attributed to these diets. These students are developing courses on food sovereignty at tribal colleges and universities, such as “traditional food and wellness” to train the peers and future generations of health through traditional food sources. In contemporary land sovereignty movement, the Western Shoshone people, whose political lands are in Nevada, sued the United States for attempting to dump highly toxic nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain. Though the Shoshone lost in the Nevada District Court, they were able to draw stir up enough public opposition that the dumping was prevented and the site no longer deemed as an appropriate location for nuclear waste dumping (Butcher 210). Finally, economic development is spurred across indigenous cultures through articulations of national sovereignty. The work to prevent dumping on Yucca mountain moved past courts and into communities, where Shoshone community members exerted power to control their lands, regardless of what the courts outside of their nation said was legal. In 2007, “American Indian nations, Canadian First nations, New Zealand Maori Iwis, and Australian Aborigine” groups all signed a treaty to engage in economic trade – thus empowering these nations to support their international allies working against the structures of settler colonialism that deny them many routes to economic development (Miller 1103).

In looking at all of these articulations of Native sovereignty together, it is clear that benign neglect of American Indian nations has neither succeeded in spatially removing American Indians from their political lands, nor assimilating them into the United States' hegemonic culture, but instead has reinvigorated American Indian tribes to root down in their lands and culture – which are tried and true sources of empowerment. Through movement to generate tribal health, self-sufficiency and economic development, American Indian Nations are working against “structural genocide” and championing their sovereign rights as sources of new opportunities for empowerment.

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