Unsettling Canada: A review

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Keywords: Indigenous politics; Indigenous rights; Indigenous economics; settler colonialism

Arthur Manuel is not a radical.¹ I realize that this statement needs to be further explained because many people, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, would regard him as such. In fact, one federal government Member of Parliament referred to Manuel as an “economic terrorist” (p. 172). I am also certain that some within the Aboriginal political establishment take exception to many of Manuel’s assertions and his accounting of events. They may regard him as a radical and dismiss his version of history, but I believe that he makes a vital and refreshing contribution to our understanding of contemporary Indigenous struggles in Canada, which according to Manuel, began with the 1969 White Paper (p. 27). Still, what Manuel is calling for is not revolutionary or radical and yet, because he seeks to stand up for Indigenous political and economic autonomy, the state and its proponents will often regard him as such. My assertion that Manuel is not a radical also informs my critique here. First, let us consider Manuel’s valuable contributions to

¹ Although Grand Chief Ronald M. Derrickson is credited as co-author, it appears as though his contribution primarily limited to the Afterword. The bulk of the story is being told from Arthur Manuel’s perspective, which I engage here.
our knowledge of settler colonial relations that are far too often dominated by state-centric discourses and interpretations.

Reading *Unsettling Canada: A National Wake-Up Call*, I was reminded of his father George Manuel’s (1974) book, *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*. Both books speak to the heart and truth of matters, and are undeniably focused on obtaining justice for Indigenous peoples. They were written for Indigenous people, leaders and activists, although they certainly speak to settler Canadians as well. They are not academic books but this is a good thing in my view. That they are rooted in the lived experiences of their authors and are written accessibly is precisely why they offer such important contributions to the canon of Indigenous rights literature in Canada. Manuel’s insightful analysis of the Aboriginal land, rights and economic struggles in Canada is based on his personal experiences as a residential school survivor, youth activist, father, band chief, business person and promoter of Indigenous alternatives to the economic and political status quo. He is a man who has admittedly made mistakes but, politically speaking, he is one of the few who has not strayed from his original vision of fighting for political and economic justice, while not selling out his sacred obligations to protect the land or the birthrights of future generations. Like his father, he would rather pass on the legacy of a legitimate struggle, than sign a deal² that future generations could not live with (pp. 3-4). As Manuel has grown older, his work took a turn toward economic matters, through his Indigenous Network on Economics and Trade, but he has always maintained that, “taking care of Mother Earth is the most important contribution we can make” (p. 11). His perspective on politics and economics in Canada is refreshingly rooted in Indigenous worldviews and perspectives that remain constant despite the tremendous pressure to funnel our grievances through state-centric processes. In this regard, Arthur Manuel is “old school.”

Perhaps most importantly for me, Manuel has never forgotten that, “Nothing we have ever gained has been given to us or surrendered without a fight” (p. 3). My own people heard similar sentiments from Robert Kennedy, Jr. when his organization, the Natural Resources Defense Council, helped Nuu-chah-nulth people defend our forests in Clayoquot Sound from clear-cut logging in the 1990s. Power is seldom shared willingly, if ever. Some people might think this assessment is too simplistic, indicating a zero-sum game despite the vast complexity of settler colonialism but, as Manuel indicates throughout his book, Canada has taken every possible opportunity to thwart Indigenous land and rights claims. The battle has been constant and remains so today, despite the recent optimism that some have felt with Justin Trudeau’s Liberals recently coming to power in Ottawa. Manuel’s insight here is critical. He reminds us that Canada has always been hostile to our efforts to restore Indigenous nationhood and economies. Despite small “victories” here and there, Indigenous peoples remain mired in a constant, intense battle to assert our own governance systems, economies and right to exist as Indigenous peoples. Any student of these matters should understand this but, at the same time, we can never underestimate the state’s power to co-opt us into complacency with half-hearted

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² This is referring mainly to those ‘deals’ offered by the governments through the comprehensive claims negotiations, or the “modern treaty process” in British Columbia.
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Manuel’s lessons on the ethics of leadership first began by watching both his mother and father. He writes, “despite their unrelenting toil, both my parents understood that you had to give back to your community” (p. 19). Manuel also learned from his own experiences leading a revolt in the residential school he attended, and discussing it with his father: “I understood from my father that simply lashing out against injustice is rarely productive. You have to think things through; you have to work with people first and develop clear objectives and then be ready to act. You are responsible for those you lead” (p. 23). This advice would stick with Manuel and is no doubt why he often appears so measured and reasonable, despite what his detractors may say.

That he has held steadfast to his belief in the justness and righteousness of Indigenous political and economic autonomy has rankled the political elite in Canada. Manuel has been more than willing to understand the rules and play by their game, but only to a point. There is a line that he has been unwilling to cross – most notably his refusal to engage in comprehensive claims negotiations, which he and others felt had a price of admission that was too high. This is one of the main reasons why I appreciate Manuel’s story.

Manuel also learned something else from residential schools that would inform his views of Indigenous-settler relations in Canada more generally. He writes that what residential schools really achieved was to “teach [Indigenous people] how to follow orders from authorities” (p. 22). This theme of contending with, but also acquiescing at times, to Canadian authorities, is central to the book and Manuel’s critique. Manuel writes of the Assembly of First Nations in Ottawa and the First Nations Summit in British Columbia, that part of their crisis of leadership is, “their complete dedication to not rocking the boat” (p. 204). This is part of a long-standing debate within Indigenous communities, but I believe that we cannot ignore the debilitating impact that residential schools had on our willingness to ‘mix it up’ with the state. For generations, our children and future leaders were fed a constant stream of lies that placed settlers and their ways above everything Indigenous. I do not want to suggest that every ounce of fight was beaten out of us, for clearly it was not, but we should not ignore the long-term impacts of such a one-sided experience on our individual and collective psyches.

And it is not only our public leaders that were affected. There has been a notable trend in grassroots struggles on the ground with respect to the legitimate use of force. That trajectory has gone from Indigenous peoples possessing a clear right and duty to physically defend themselves and their lands, to petitions and peaceful protests that dare not inconvenience Canadians. When fisheries disputes got heated in the 1970s and Department of Fisheries and Oceans enforcement officers tried to “muscle” Indigenous people, the Union of BC Indian Chiefs would not back down and released a press statement, which indicated that “violence would be met with violence” (p. 60). These confrontations were not new, but are reflective of a continuity of violent contention with settler Canadians. Notable conflicts included Restigouche (1981),
Kanehsatake/Oka (1990), Ipperwash (1995), Gustafsen Lake (1995), Cheam (1999), Esgenoöpetitj/Burn Church (1999-2001), and Sun Peaks (2001). This list is not exhaustive, but it does highlight a number of higher profile incidents that occurred when Indigenous peoples who were committed to protecting their lands and/or rights encountered the violence of the state. There is a notable gap from 2001 until the Mi’kmaq-led anti-fracking protests at Elsipogtog in 2013. I would suggest that there are number of interrelated reasons for this, one being that the impact of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 9/11 are still being felt today all over the world.

The post-9/11 era has seemed to reinforce the state’s monopoly on the legitimate use of force for both non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples. From the 1990s to the 2000s, the inspirational Zapatista Movement in Mexico shifted from an armed uprising to one that was expressly non-violent. The Irish Republican Army officially disarmed in 2005 in favour of strict political organizing and earlier this year FARC rebels in Columbia officially disarmed. The trend is now well established. Manuel is not an advocate of violence, which he makes very clear in his book (pp. 220-221), but I would contend that whatever reason or rationale given for such a position, and no matter how much it may make sense morally and strategically, the general aversion to conflict seems to have prevented most forms of protest from even being mildly inconvenient. Prominent Aboriginal leaders used to routinely threaten mainstream politicians with civil unrest, but this threat has gradually become more and more hollow, especially since 2001. Of course, one cannot ignore the anti-terror legislation that has been brought in over the years that criminalizes forms of dissent that threaten “economic stability.”

Much closer to home, the West Coast Warrior Society, a group of mostly Nuu-chah-nulth youth, also disbanded in 2005, after significant pressure from Canadian law enforcement and intelligence agencies made the radical defense of our communities, within the warrior society model, untenable.³ People in our communities were becoming increasingly conflict averse and, at the same time, governments were more becoming more willing to negotiate, albeit with strict conditions. Following the “Oka Crisis” in 1990, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples began, as well as the Treaty Process in British Columbia (BCTP). It seemed that settler Canada was finally willing to negotiate, even though the BCTP was based upon the 1975 federal Comprehensive Claims policy and the long-running Nisga’a negotiations that had proved divisive amongst Indigenous communities from the beginning. The formation of the First Nations Summit, which included Native communities willing to engage in the new tri-partite negotiations, solidified a break from the Union of BC Indian Chiefs (UBCIC), which began in the 1970s.

According to Manuel, the Department of Indian Affairs helped facilitate this divisiveness by offering economic resources and time to those willing to negotiate. But, for some First Nations the BC Treaty Process was a non-starter from the beginning. Manuel writes that the Comprehensive Claims policy was crafted to “extinguish (Aboriginal rights and title) as quickly

³ The WCWS supported Indigenous community struggles in Nuu-chah-nulth, Coast Salish, Secwepemc, and Mi’kmaq territories from 2000 until 2005.
and as cheaply as possible” (p. 46). He concedes that the language the governments use has changed to include words like “certainty,” but he remains convinced that extinguishment of Aboriginal rights and title is still the order of the day (p. 196). Russell Diabo (2014), a Mohawk policy analyst, is also a prominent critic of the comprehensive claims processes, referring to the negotiations across the country as “termination tables.” And while the new Liberal government has made some positive moves, such as beginning an inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women, early indications do not suggest any drastic changes to its Comprehensive Claims policy or negotiation mandates, despite the “nation-to-nation” campaign rhetoric. I personally cannot disagree with Manuel or Diabo’s criticisms of the negotiations, as I observed them first hand when I worked for the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council from 2001 to 2005. In the four years I was there, plus another year and half working for neighbouring Coast Salish communities in a similar capacity, I never once saw the governments actually negotiate or show any flexibility in their mandates. They had, for all intents and purposes, determined a formula for calculating “treaty” agreements and applied that template everywhere. The governments have shown an unwavering desire to diminish Indigenous claims to land, water and rights as quickly and cheaply as possible.

Before I offer a critique of Manuel’s perspectives and propositions, I want to emphasize the importance of his legitimate criticisms of our own Aboriginal leadership. I believe that this is important because the story of settler colonialism in Canada is not simply a story of what happened to us. To discount our agency as historical events unfolded is dangerous and eschews our ability to imagine a different future, based on our capacity to make different decisions. We must support our leaders when necessary, as well as be willing to hold them accountable when appropriate. I have not read such a scathing indictment of Canadian Aboriginal leadership since Taiaiake Alfred’s (1999) Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto. One thing that Manuel does, however, is name names, a bold move that has no doubt angered a few of those Aboriginal politicians. A full reading reveals that Manuel is not being malicious, however. The story he is telling is complete with what, where, why, how and who. If we cannot be honest about these things, we inhibit our ability to learn from our mistakes and grow as communities.

There are sensitivities about criticism in Indigenous political circles, which Manuel is certainly aware of, but which he counters with the notion that, “Many of our leaders have too long dodged responsibility for their actions by claiming that any criticism, no matter how mild, shows a lack of respect and is somehow therefore not Indigenous” (pp. 215-216). I have also encountered this dynamic, especially as it relates to the BCTP, which has proven contentious in our communities. Legal scholar Johnny Mack addresses this issue in his work, where he reminds us that iisaak (“respect” in Nuu-chah-nulth) also includes respect for oneself and the truth, and that our desire for peace or tranquility cannot be at all costs, especially when it demands that we be silent in the face of injustice or corruption (2009, p. 24). This is why I think Manuel’s book is so refreshing and valuable. He tells his story and his truth, regardless of how contentious it may be. He believes in the struggle and loves Indigenous communities. So much of what we hear about Aboriginal politics in Canada is sanitized through a pro-government lens that is afraid to
rock the boat. Now, as valuable as I think Manuel’s truth is, I do not want to leave you with the impression that he is infallible either. When speaking with some elders about Manuel’s assertion that the exodus from the UBCIC was simply a division sowed by Indian Affairs, I was told another story that included west coast communities expressing different priorities than interior communities, specifically as it related to fisheries advocacy. I am not in a place to judge either assertion for I was not there, but I think we need to make space for multiple perspectives and not shy away from legitimate and respectful criticism.

I want to conclude with my original claim that Arthur Manuel is not a radical. He clearly diverts from much of the mainstream Aboriginal leadership in that he finds the federal Comprehensive Claims policy and “treaty” negotiations fundamentally flawed. He very simply asserts, “No nation on earth should be forced to enter a negotiation that is destined to end with its own extinguishment” (p. 59). There are specific differences between the position that Manuel takes and those of the Aboriginal mainstream leadership that are noteworthy. Unsettling Canada includes many of these key differences, but Manuel certainly does not believe in isolationism or non-engagement either.

Arthur Manuel would likely agree with me. In his own words Manuel states, “Some will call us radical…but we are not radical. We are standing behind one of the most conservative institutions in the country and that is the Supreme Court of Canada” (p. 127). Manuel points to a number of prominent Aboriginal rights and title cases like Calder, Delgamuuwk and Tsilhqot-in, Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982 and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples as indicative of minimum requirements for true nation-to-nation relations. He suggests that implementing these minimums would represent a decolonizing effort (pp. 79, 218, 224) and this is where we differ. While I agree that these would be important steps and are in fact a good place to start, I have to agree with Tuck and Yang (2012) that “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” nor is it likely to be achieved through mainstream Canadian legal and political channels.

While Manuel specifically acknowledges that none of the Supreme Court rulings represent a “panacea” (pp. 115-116), he also does not mention the severe limitations that we cannot ignore when considering the full effect of these court decisions. For example, while extolling the significance of Delgamuuwk (pp. 113-116), he does not refer to Chief Justice Antonio Lamer’s extensive list for justifiable infringement, which include “the development of agriculture, forestry, mining, and hydroelectric power, the general economic development of the interior of British Columbia, protection of the environment or endangered species, the building of infrastructure and the settlement of foreign populations to support those aims, are the kinds of objectives that are consistent with this purpose and, in principle, can justify the infringement of aboriginal title” (Supra note 40 at 165). According to this, settlers can pretty much keep doing what they have been doing for generations on Indigenous lands. And we continue see this play out with government reluctance to ensure free, prior and informed consent with respect to economic development as outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which Manuel includes in his appendix (pp. 235-249).
With respect to Indigenous peoples and environmentalists, Manuel understands that the relationships have always been precarious, if not downright colonial at times, but he holds out hope that common ground can be found and that Indigenous peoples have a lot to offer in this regard. This is not a direct criticism of Manuel, but I always urge caution when issues like this are framed as “what Indigenous people can offer mainstream society.” Leanne Simpson (2004) has outlined in detail some of the potential dangers of this, including the abstraction of Indigenous knowledge out of its contexts and the fact that many western activists and academics are trying to protect the knowledge without explicitly protecting the land or Indigenous responsibilities and rights for and to that land (Simpson, 2004). I appreciate that Indigenous peoples do have a lot to offer in the way of knowledge and our understanding of how to live with the earth, but we must be self-determining in regards to access to this knowledge and it needs to accompany a genuine effort to decolonize our current asymmetrical relationships with settlers. Again, Manuel might agree with this, but he does not make it explicit in this book.

In 1974, George Manuel and Michael Posluns wrote, “European North Americans are already beginning to work their way out of the value system based on conquest and competition, and into a system that may at least be compatible with ours” (Manuel & Posluns, p. 266). Like his father, Arthur Manuel concludes on an optimistic note. He writes, “One thing is certain: the flood waters of colonialism are, at long last, receding” (p. 223). Sadly, I think George was, and forty years later Arthur is, overly optimistic in their assessments. I do hope the end of colonialism will soon be upon us. For this to occur, I believe that we need more voices like Manuel’s, more grassroots activism, and more ‘old school-style’ leaders willing to sacrifice for the greater good of Indigenous peoples. Manuel briefly points out the “important and often leading role of women in our struggle” (p. 211). The book I would love to read would be from Beverly Manuel’s perspective. I would like to read this story again, but this time from the perspective of Indigenous women, including the great works of Beverly and Arthur’s daughters. While I believe that Manuel makes some important contributions in his book, especially with respect to Aboriginal leadership and ongoing settler Canadian dominance, he only hints at what I believe will be required for us to move forward with a true decolonizing movement. For too long, Indigenous men have led the way in our political, legal and economic engagements with Canada. It is long past time to restore balance to our communities and centre the voices of Indigenous women.

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4 Beverly Manuel is Arthur’s ex-wife.
References


