

# What is Meant *by*, and What *is*, the Fundamental Contradiction of Our Society?

Most importantly, what our disagreement with settler colonialism comes down to is one question: what is the fundamental contradiction of capitalist society? But before answering that, what is meant here by “the fundamental contradiction”?

The fundamental contradiction in society is the force which causes everything else in society to move in the way that it does; from the biggest of imperialist wars, to the smallest of transactions at a coffee shop. As Frederick Engels puts it in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*: “[The] *Fundamental contradiction, whence arise all the contradictions in which our present-day society moves, and which modern industry brings to light.*” How we relate to one another, how we look at ourselves in the mirror, how we get around the places we live in, everything is affected by the fundamental contradiction of our society. Marxists understand this contradiction to be that between labor and capital. Those who ascribe to settler colonialism understand it to be between settled and settlers. To help think this through, let’s imagine what a society defined by the latter contradiction would look like:

Indigenous people make up less than 3% of the population<sup>1</sup> and 87% live outside of reservations.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this exercise, let’s say that since 82% of the population lives in cities,<sup>3</sup> 71% of indigenous people—overall—live in cities (this is of course very rough statistical work, mostly gotten from the 2020 census, but should serve us fine). Do the contradictions between people who are indigenous and people who are not dominate city life? Think about this for a moment. Can you argue that, *dominantly*, your life while living in a city is every day, every moment, informed by such a contradiction? Does this contradiction dominate your grocery shopping, or does the need to reproduce yourself to go back to work and be exploited by a capitalist to receive a wage? When we relate to one another, are these interactions primarily informed by how the US has ~300 reservations in it, or is it informed by the massive system of capitalism around us? When you hop on the bus, does the bus run off gas—a commodity critical to sustaining all basic ways of living and productive forces in our society—brought about by the oppression of the settled, or the oppression of the working class? Are literally tens of millions of people able to subsist off a parasitic relationship between them and less than 3% of the country? Rather obviously, the answer to my hypothetical, and all these questions, is no, and is not made to be otherwise by a handful of indigenous people moving into a city.

While indigenous people face serious and unique oppression in both cities and on reservations (higher rates of obesity, mortality, and alcoholism to name a few), for the fundamental contradiction to be between the settled and settlers, it must influence every single person’s life and how they interact with one another economically and politically. To go further, neither does this contradiction even dominate the lives of indigenous people who live in cities, nor accurately describe their oppression, ultimately leading us to being unable to overcome it. Economically, indigenous people are completely subsumed in the working class within cities. There are of course sections of industry and agriculture where you have more indigenous people working, but our economy is not built off the labor of the indigenous. Our economy, every day, sits on and subsists off of, the working class, which no ethnic group exists entirely without of in this country. So, I think we can confidently say that for the 71% of the indigenous

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1 <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2022-11-22/the-native-american-and-alaska-native-population-at-a-glance>

2 <https://www.ncoa.org/article/american-indians-and-alaska-natives-key-demographics-and-characteristics>

3 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/269967/urbanization-in-the-united-states/>

population who has moved to cities, this contradiction between settlers and settled is not fundamental even in their own lives. But, what about the other 13% on reservations?

Now, on reservations, for settler colonialism to be the fundamental contradiction, class cannot be the most important contradiction internal to a reservation,<sup>4</sup> and for this to be true, there must be an indigenous bourgeoisie and economy *separate* from the settler bourgeoisie and economy. If they are unable to sustain themselves through their own internal economic processes, and must interact in significant ways with the broader US economy—which is one of capitalist-imperialism and defined by the contradiction between labor and capital—then we cannot say that they have an independent bourgeoisie and working class—which are not dominantly influenced by the contradictions born from the US economy. So, let's accept that they have a completely internal economy, with their own national bourgeoisie and working class. This would mean that the exploitation by the indigenous bourgeoisie is subordinate to the oppression of the entirety of the indigenous population by the settlers. So, is this actually how reservations function? No. Reservations would not be able to function if not for the constant participation and interaction with the US economy<sup>5</sup> and so we don't see a situation where reservations have established themselves as areas in which separate economic life is carried out. Furthermore, the indigenous members of the bourgeoisie do in fact exploit the indigenous working class, who are not exempt from capitalist exploitation simply because they are of the same ethnicity.

These arguments are very broad, but if we compare this to the Japanese invasion of China, it can be helpful. Before that though, I'd like to point out a serious misunderstanding that MIM has of the Chinese communists. In the MIM piece they say that "*The Chinese revolution, which Maoists uphold as the most significant advance towards socialism, didn't concern itself with the characteristic mineutia of the enemy class; they opposed the Japanese occupiers – labor and all,*" this is categorically false and a quote from Mao will clarify:

*"We Chinese Communists must also follow this line in our practice. We must unite with the proletariat of all the capitalist countries, with the proletariat of Japan, Britain, the United States, Germany, Italy, and all other capitalist nations, for this is the only way to overthrow imperialism, to liberate our nation and people and to liberate the other nations and peoples of the world. This is our internationalism, with which we oppose both narrow nationalism and narrow patriotism."*

MIM is the exact sort of narrow nationalism and narrow patriotism that Mao warns against. The Chinese communists were *deeply* concerned with what MIM derogatorily calls the "*mineutia*" of the enemy class. Not only did the communists actively try to reform captured Japanese soldiers (and did so successfully), but during the Korean war, their POW camps worked effectively as re-education programs for US soldiers. Additionally, they convinced twenty-five US soldiers to move to China afterward.<sup>6</sup> Only by concerning themselves with what MIM tells us to write off were they able to

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4 This is not to say that they can't exist, but just that the contradiction between ruling class and oppressed class within the reservations are not as important as a different one, say, national oppression.

5 For instance, the vast majority of indigenous people have to travel off reservation for work. Keep in mind, that we have already said 87% of the indigenous population doesn't even live on reservations, so, less than half of that 13% even works within them. This is significant because as we said, there must be an internal and independent bourgeoisie for the oppression of indigenous working class by their indigenous bourgeoisie to not matter and for that to be achieved, they would have to have a far more self-reliant economy. Only a separate economy can create a separate bourgeoisie. [https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/4595/80\\_Or\\_L\\_Rev\\_757.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y#page=15](https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/4595/80_Or_L_Rev_757.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y#page=15)

6 Fun Fact: This, coupled with a whole slew of POW's coming back to the US talking about the horrors of capitalist-imperialism (which they were taught about in the communist POW camps) in large part led to the phenomenon of

advance the international proletarian struggle. Only by understanding the fundamental nature of class oppression were they able to win over the enemy soldiers. To do otherwise would be to take a, frankly, lazy and anti-people approach, and one which holds us back from achieving socialist revolution in our society and laying the eventual foundations for a communist society.

But, let's set aside the sort of analysis which helped the Chinese achieve socialism and carry on with our hypothetical comparison concerning settler colonialism. When the Japanese invasion began, it grew to dictate primarily how the Kuomintang behaved, which dictated how the communists behaved, which dictated how the national bourgeoisie and landlords behaved, which dictated how the working class and peasants behaved. It became the main force for all other motion in Chinese society at the time. From this, the communists were able to form a temporary united front with the Kuomintang and national bourgeoisie to fight off the Japanese invaders. The communists correctly understood that in order to resolve any other contradictions, the contradiction between the Japanese invaders and China as a whole must first be addressed. Would this have been the case if Japan's occupation only affected a tiny fraction of the population? No, and in fact, it wasn't until the Japanese invasion got intense enough to threaten the stability of the national bourgeoisie that unity could be found. If we compare that to here (the US population at-large as the Japanese and the indigenous population as the Chinese), we would be saying that we need to resolve a contradiction which concerns less than .4%<sup>7</sup> of the population before we can resolve the contradiction between labor and capital.<sup>8</sup> This very clearly does not make sense when the far larger, more dominant contradiction of labor and capital influences the rest of the 99.6% of the population.<sup>9</sup>

The reality is that, at one point, the settling of indigenous lands was far more of an acute contradiction; causing wars like the Seminole wars to break out and all sorts of other forms of resistance. Although this country was colonized, and the indigenous people were brutally murdered and removed from their home, those same conditions just do not exist today. When people insist on "decolonization" what are they really demanding? Land back for less than 3% of the population, including the indigenous members of the bourgeoisie who already hold most of the assets on the reservations. Would it not make sense to fight for revolution that will end all forms of oppression for the working class, which also includes oppressed indigenous people? These lands have been settled and as has been seen with the bloody and violent creation of all nations, we are left with what our ruling class has reduced the native inhabitants to: the slowly disappearing remnants of cultures, economic systems, and politics. This should be seen as nothing short of a genocide and one of the many reasons for why the capitalist-imperialists who rule over us must be overthrown. But this will not be done with the lazy analysis settler colonialism presents us with; keeping us wandering in a swamp of a-historical and unscientific ideas. Only with the clarity that Marxism gives us will we be able to overcome this oppression.

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accusing communists of "brainwashing".

7 .4% comes from the 13% of indigenous people who live on reservations when compared to the entire American population.

8 The oppression of the indigenous of this country will of course have to be resolved, but for this to occur we first must achieve a socialist society and thus must first address the contradiction between capital and labor. This does not mean we must dogmatically only talk about class oppression and nothing else (like racial or gender oppression), but that it is what we must understand as fundamental to everything else. Again, the oppression of the indigenous population is a serious contradiction that must be resolved, but it would be erroneous for us to treat that which concerns such a tiny fraction of our population as primary above all else.

9 The reality is that, at one point, the settling of indigenous lands was far more of an acute contradiction, causing wars like the Seminole wars to break out and all sorts of other forms of resistance. But now, these lands have been settled and as has been seen with the bloody and violent creation of all nations, we are left what our ruling class has reduced them to: the slowly disappearing remnants of their cultures, economic systems, and politics. This should be seen as nothing short of genocide and one of the many reasons for why the capitalist-imperialists who rule over us must be overthrown and never allowed back in power to carry out any more atrocities.