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## **The Dakota Access Pipeline, Indigenous Studies, and Political Economy<sup>1</sup>**

### **1. Introduction**

In a recent interview, Nick Estes, activist, academic, and enrolled member of the Kul Wicasa Oyate (Lower Brulé Sioux tribe),<sup>2</sup> raised an important issue regarding 'traditional knowledges' and 'non-western' understandings of being-in-the-world. Commenting on Native American protests against oil pipelines and the potential danger they form for drinking water on Native American lands, he asked:

At the same time, when we say something like 'water is life' or 'water protectors', why should we as Indigenous people have to perform a kind of spiritual connection with water? It should be enough to say that every group of people on this planet has a basic human right to water. (Estes in Serpe 2019)

Obviously, he argues simultaneously on two separate levels. On the first, he acknowledges the meaning of water for people as possibly more than merely a basic human need. On the second, he affirms the right to water in the name of planetary humanism, of the equality of all people. Later in the interview, Estes consequently problematises the class and colonial dimensions of unequal access to water in the USA.

His reflections bring together elements from very different traditions of knowledge. So does this contribution. On the one hand, it offers an analysis of the protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline (#NoDAPL) from the perspective of political economy, and on the other, from what is called Indigenous Studies or, in the context of the United States, Native American Studies. Like Postcolonial Studies, these two academic projects aim at studying, among other things, material, social, and cultural inequalities as well as their interconnections and roots in colonial structures of dependency. All three do this with very different epistemologies and consequently different understandings of inequality. Crudely speaking, in the case of Postcolonial Studies, there is at least a tendency to see inequality as a result of primarily cultural and intellectual struggles linked to the colonial experience. In political economy, especially in its explicitly or vaguely Marxist variety, inequality is the material consequence of a capitalist world system that necessarily reproduces the economic dependencies of its peripheries on its exploitative centres. It is due to such differences that scholars sometimes claim an inherent incompatibility of postcolonial and Marxist approaches to structure and agency as well as to the relevance of the economic for the dynamics of history (Chibber 2013). In global academia, Indigenous Studies have kept a much more

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1 I would like to thank the students of the master seminar 'American Indians and First Nations,' winter term 2018/19, and the bachelor seminar 'Indigenous Studies and Postcolonial Studies,' summer term 2019, for inspiring and thought-provoking discussions.

2 Like many of the terms used in this article, the term 'tribe' is controversial. Since the people belonging to the Kul Wicasa Oyate use it in their official statements, I use it too.

low-key profile. This has at least partly to do with their focus on the local, on spatio-temporal specificities of concrete colonial situations of inequality. They focus on first nations' 'fourth-world' conditions characterised by continuing internal colonialism, specific forms of racism, highly ambivalent legal statuses as 'domestic dependent nations' and various traumatic experiences of genocide and forced assimilation programmes in the past. Furthermore, they aim at integrating 'traditional knowledge systems' into their academic work. In many cases, they act as the theoretical-activist wings of movements for the intellectual and material survival of relatively small groups of people within polities that understand themselves as postcolonial settler societies.

This article is no critique of Postcolonial Studies or Theory. More modestly, it suggests a promising approach within an increasingly plural Postcolonial Studies formation through analysing a recent (post-)colonial conflict from both an Indigenous Studies and a political economy perspective. I contend that both can be used and combined for critiques of and resistance to a capitalist world system that produces 'slow violence' (as well as not so slow violence) against the poor (among whom indigenous groups are overrepresented, at least in terms of relative poverty at the nation state level), ecological catastrophe, and cultural alienation. A combination of both perspectives provides a materialist ecocentrism that demands and argues for global environmental justice. Hence, this article briefly introduces Indigenous Studies and political economy as academic projects, then familiarises readers with the history of the protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline and the intellectual and cultural tools of resistance the protesters employed. It goes on to examine the movement of the #NoDAPL 'water protectors' and the context in which they acted from an Indigenous Studies and a political economy perspective, respectively. Finally, it discusses Indigenous Studies and political economy as approaches complementing each other in cultural-materialist postcolonial area studies.<sup>3</sup>

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3 I choose the term postcolonial area studies (to be distinguished from a cold-war tradition of area studies and taking up the legacy of a critical area studies that British Studies scholars developed in the 1970s and 1980s) because I have recently decided not to flag my work as Cultural Studies any longer. This is due to the fact that Cultural Studies, as practised in German English and American Studies departments, has (a) a reductive selection bias that privileges aesthetic phenomena as objects of analysis, and (b) operates with a reductive concept of power that interprets it as primarily discursive. This ignores (a) many cultural phenomena British Cultural Studies was originally interested in, and (b) the fact that political power, to quote Mao, comes from the barrel of the gun (at least partly). Two recent phenomena demonstrate the latter point drastically (and confirm that it is not just a martial phrase): whereas the blaming of ecologists for the Australian fires in winter 2019/20 can be traced back to the *discursive power* of the Murdoch media, based on their near-monopoly position in the country, the renewed war by Brazil's government against the country's indigenous people serves as an example for the continuing unscrupulous use of naked *military-political power*. Hence, Cultural Studies' reductionism is unhelpful in identifying possible forms of emancipatory political agency.

## 2. Indigenous Studies/Native American Studies

Indigenous studies work under the assumption of the existence of

radically different way[s] of being and seeing in relation to western social practices, performing an alternative ontology that both eludes and exceeds western meaning-making systems. When seen from the viewpoint of 'the west', such practices destabilize orthodox power relations and affirm other histories of time and place; [...] the colonial present works to eradicate, tame and domesticate these alternative social orders. (Smith and Turner 2013, 273)

Hence, one of the starting points of Native American Studies was the analysis of the politics of internal colonialism that comprises exactly such processes of domestication (Forsdick 2013, 655). This topic was already discussed at the First Chicago Conference of American Indian Scholars in 1961, the unofficial inaugural meeting of Native American Studies (Kidwell and Velie 2005, 1). Native American Studies clearly has to be understood as a product of the 1960s: it coincided with, and took inspiration from, the civil rights and anti-Vietnam war movements as well as black and red power in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Kidwell and Velie 2005, 3); furthermore, it was accompanied by cultural movements such as the Native American (literary) Renaissance, whose beginning scholars date back to the publication of N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) (Kidwell and Velie 2005, 6). However, scholars point out that Native American intellectual traditions are of course much older and had not only specific epistemologies but also distinct modes of communication. The ability to remember was systematically taught and trained, and Native American history was passed on through the generations in order to allow them to survive as nations<sup>4</sup> under colonial conditions, as Cavender Wilson explains (1998, 29; 35). In terms of disciplines and sub-disciplines, oral history has therefore always played a central role in Native American Studies, the aim being to gather both individual histories and collective oral traditions. Like many other 'studies' projects, Native American Studies suggest multi-perspectivity and interdisciplinarity and refer to History, Anthropology, Literary Studies, Linguistics but also Law as areas from which tools and questions could be adopted (Kidwell and Velie 2005, 6). Some scholars point to a parallel with the British Cultural Studies project – the intention to move into the centre what has remained marginal in traditional academic disciplines (Kidwell and Velie 2005, 6).

Concretely, Native American Studies scholars want to complement or correct traditional 'western' with local modes of knowledge that are both geographically and temporally specific, consisting of "oral traditions, the collective memories of past

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4 The term 'nation' is of course problematic too. Some scholars argue that the Native American idea of a nation clearly differs from the European and emphasises community among humans and between humans and their non-human relations – animals, plants, eco-systems. Consequently, they suggest limiting the use of the term 'nation' to discussions concerning the legal relationships between Native Americans and the US government (see e.g. Champagne 2007, 367).

events, and intimate knowledge of a particular place" (Kidwell and Velie 2005, 8).<sup>5</sup> These kinds of knowledges are not separated along disciplinary lines (thus making postdisciplinarity<sup>6</sup> a necessity), nor do they subscribe to historical linearity, and they see no difference between the human and the non-human world (Kidwell and Velie 2005, 8).<sup>7</sup> Although the research interests of Native American Studies thus cannot be neatly correlated with traditional disciplines, they can be grouped around core topics: the land (What exactly is its relevance for Native Americans? How can humans maintain, or return to, sensible relations with all beings?), historical agency (How to avoid the shortcomings of 'victimist history' that portrays Native Americans as "billiard balls knocked around by powerful colonial powers and forces" [Champagne 2007, 360] and do justice to Native American creative resistance under colonial conditions?), tribal sovereignty (How to deal with the tension between an ethical claim to land as belonging to the people who live, or used to live, on it, and a formally legal one as being negotiated with US Congress?), and language and aesthetic production (as processes of meaning-making and of decolonising the mind). Having developed a body of literature, a set of core questions, self-reflection, and institutionalisation, some scholars claim that Native American Studies has attained the status of a discipline (Kidwell and Velie 2005, 15; 131).

According to Duane Champagne, sociologist, lawyer, and centrally involved in the development of a Native American Studies Programme at UCLA, the goal of Native American Studies is to provide "alternative interpretations of United States history, law, policy, and Indian history and culture that are not available in other academic disciplines" (1998, 185). Champagne demands an unabashedly holistic study of culture in order to explain how Native Americans have managed to survive 500 years of colonialism (1998, 182). It is due to questions like this that, like other 'studies' projects of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, Native American Studies has been accused of partisanship and a corresponding lack of academic detachment and objectivity. Scholars, however, reply by pointing towards a responsibility to Native American communities (Kidwell and Velie 2005, 139): "We advocate an intellectual stance that values an understanding of opposing viewpoints in order to assure that Native voices, which have not been attended to before, are heard equally with non-Native voices" (Kidwell and Velie 2005, 136). Native American Studies sketch out a liberationist alternative modernity (Lazarus and Varma 2009, 328) that does not envisage a return

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5 Tripathy identifies the value attached to these modes of knowledge as a major difference between Indigenous and Postcolonial Studies: whereas they count only as literary and figurative in the latter, they are acknowledged as academic and scientific in the former (2009, 47-48).

6 Following Ngai-Ling Sum and Bob Jessop, with postdisciplinarity I describe a thematically oriented methodological approach that "identifies and studies specific problems independently of how different disciplines would classify them, if at all" (2013, 14). Like the 'post' in 'postcolonial,' thus, the 'post' here does not necessarily or primarily have a temporal meaning.

7 Smith and Turner have recently defined Indigenous Studies in New Zealand in similar terms and identified the link between land and people as the basis for epistemological, economic, and esoteric principles and practices (2013, 283). This shows that there is common ground among Indigenous Studies despite their reliance on specific local modes of knowledge.

to an idealised static point in the past but to dynamic paths of social development that were pursued prior to colonisation (Serpe 2019). One of its central questions concerns the meaning of land. This is at the heart of the conflict over the Dakota Access Pipeline.

### 3. Political Economy

Political economy's main goal is to study the interrelationship between the economic and the political in the logics and the concrete processes of capital accumulation. It is based on the assumption that "the economic constitutes the political and the political constitutes the economic" (O'Brien and Williams 2004, 38). This does not describe mere circularity but hints at processes of institutional regulation and discursive regularisation in the service of stabilisation of accumulation regimes. Since capitalism leads to the exploitation of workers (via competition) and uneven development (because capitalist centres increase their wealth through the exploitation of peripheries), it produces phases of overproduction and underconsumption as well as incidents of class and geostrategic conflict, which undermine social stability and threaten the continued functioning of accumulation processes. Politics plays an important role in containing such conflicts. Governmental actors organise policy frameworks in which the economy can flourish as smoothly as possible for as long as possible. Depending on power structures and relations within nation states, such policies can consist of temporary class compromises (for example, through welfare policies) but also of mobilising divisive discourses, for example on the basis of racism, sexism, or class prejudice, and of institutionalising differential treatment of people along these lines (O'Brien and Williams 2004, 199). In the case of racism, Robert Miles has described how, in contexts of migration, processes of discursive racialisation create antagonistically institutionalised (working) class fractions (1989).<sup>8</sup>

One of political economy's most important contributions to the study of colonial and postcolonial situations is the analysis of the capitalist world system. The global exploitation of the peripheries by the centres has already been referred to. This system's roots lie in colonial relations, which have been reproduced in the postcolonial era of new imperialism. Colonialism has led to the development of underdevelopment, as Arrighi has formulated it (1978), or, in the words of André Gunder Frank, it has transformed undeveloped into underdeveloped social formations (1978).<sup>9</sup> In the imperialist world system, capital and commodities flow globally, whereas most people remain subject to national frameworks with their specific class systems. While in the centres, working-class wealth grew with increasing productivity, this was not the case in the peripheries, which became the providers of raw materials and cheap mass consumer goods. Hence, the global division of labour has direct consequences for people's life expectancy and quality of life (O'Brien and Williams 2004, 198). Since the emergence of capitalism, the world system has usually had one central power; however, it has also moved through transitional periods, when one centre supplanted another. At the moment, some political economists observe the decline of the USA as central power, which has consequences for the world system as a whole but also for the USA

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<sup>8</sup> Audrey Smedley (1998) shows similar processes in her history of 'race' discourse in the USA.

<sup>9</sup> Synoptic perspectives on the world system and the dependency of the peripheries on the centres can be found in Amin et al. (1982), Amin et al. (1990), and Herrera (2009).

itself. The most recent crises and restructurings of capitalism have provoked intensified exploitation worldwide. This has taken many forms, but prominent among them is the "continuing expropriation of the global (and local) commons by national and transnational capitalists hoping to pre-empt future crises of capitalist accumulation" (Lazarus and Varma 2009, 330). The recent North American fracking boom, leading to domestic usurpation of land with the goal of intensified extractivism in order to achieve 'energy sovereignty,' testifies to the United States' increasing difficulty in defending their role as the world system's central power. As internal colonies (when they live on reservations) and racialised class fractions (throughout the country), Native Americans are affected in particularly adverse ways by this ecologically disastrous restructuring strategy of US-American capitalism. This is what the example of the Dakota Access Pipeline shows.

#### 4. DAPL and Mni Wiconi

The DAPL is a 1,200-mile pipeline transporting crude oil from North Dakota to refineries in Illinois.<sup>10</sup> Its construction cost about \$3.8 billion – a potentially lucrative investment for Energy Transfer Partners (ETP) because of high prices for rail transport. The need for the pipeline came with the Bakken shale oil boom over the last decade.<sup>11</sup> In the first six months after its completion in 2017, five leaks were detected and fixed. According to the original plan, the pipeline should have run north of Bismarck, North Dakota's state capital, a comparatively wealthy place whose population is 92% white. However, the planners changed the route – because the pipeline was considered a risk close to a medium-sized city – and instead projected it to cross the Mni Sose (Missouri) River half a mile north of Standing Rock Reservation. The latter is one of the lowest-income communities in the country and its population is 85% non-white, primarily Native American. As a domestic infrastructural project, DAPL required less risk assessment than comparable transnational ones, such as the Canadian-US Keystone XL pipeline, which brings oil from Alberta to Texas. Still, an Environmental Impact Statement was needed and submitted by the Army Corps of Engineers (ACE), which claimed that the new course of the pipeline crossing Mni Sose did not constitute a problem, since no one lived within a radius of half a mile. The area around Standing Rock Reservation has been administered by the ACE, since the Oahe Dam was built near the mouth of Inyanwakagapi Wakpa (Cannonball River) as part of a large water reservoir project in the late 1940s. With this project, many Lakota had lost their homes and were forced to resettle either in surrounding areas or in cities. This conformed to the Truman administration's 'termination policy' aimed at incrementally phasing out the special legal status Native Americans had in the USA.

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10 This section relies primarily on information from Earthjustice (n.d.).

11 The Bakken is a geological formation in Montana and North Dakota containing large quantities of shale oil that can be extracted via the controversial technique of hydraulic fracturing (fracking).

The ACE's verdict was controversial for several reasons:

- representatives of Standing Rock's tribal council<sup>12</sup> claimed they had not been properly consulted (which was a legal requirement) by either ACE or ETP;
- the tribe has treaty rights that guarantee the integrity of reservation land – this includes access to clean water whose only source in the area, apart from private wells, is Mni Sose;
- furthermore, DAPL crosses 'unceded ancestral homelands' – including burial sites with cultural significance for native people and as such under special protection;
- the ownership of the land – a concept unknown to Native Americans before the arrival of white settlers – is controversial. Since the land has never been ceded to the USA or the state of North Dakota by a ¾ majority of male members of the tribe (a requirement agreed on by the US federal government and the Lakota in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851), it is still property of the latter though administered and maintained by the federal state. Attempts at buying out the Lakota have so far failed due to their unwillingness to sell.

The potential danger of oil spills, the disregard for culturally significant places, and the anger over a lack of consultation caused a wave of action. Between April 2016 and February 2017, several protest camps were set up north of Standing Rock. The Oceti Sakowin (seven council fires) camp, named after the traditional alliance of the Lakota, Nakota, and Dakota peoples, became the largest. The protests were led by Native Americans. However, the camps' up to 10,000 inhabitants included many other activists from diverse backgrounds. The protestors called themselves 'Mni Wiconi,' water protectors. Due to blockades and disruptions of the construction process, the governor of North Dakota declared a state of emergency in August 2016. This allowed the cooperation of agents such as the police, army, and ETP's privately hired security firm Tiger Swan and initiated a period of massive police and army presence as well as heavy-handed policing including the use of tear gas, pepper spray, dogs, and helicopters and even attempts at starving out the protest camps by blocking access roads. At least two protesters lost their eyes, one lost an arm. This level of violence attracted public attention nationally and internationally. As a consequence, Barack Obama intervened during the very last weeks of his presidency and urged ACE to consider a rerouting of DAPL. In late 2016, ACE blocked DAPL's crossing of Mni Sose and construction came to a halt. However, as expected at the time, this turned out to be a temporary respite only since ACE's decision was reversed by the new president, Donald Trump. DAPL is in operation since 2017, while there are still pending lawsuits on possible shortcomings of the ACE's consultation process with Standing Rock Tribal Council. Some protesters were sent to jail. Meanwhile, plans for an extension of DAPL are already in preparation. In order to understand the specificities of and the lessons to be drawn from the conflict, it is useful to investigate it from the perspectives of Native American Studies and political economy.

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12 Tribal councils are the elected governments of the reservations as they were introduced with the Indian Reorganization Act (1934).

#### 4.1. Honouring Relations

A Native American Studies perspective on the conflict highlights three aspects: its location in a continuing struggle against internal colonialism, its emphasis on the protection of land, and its embeddedness in cultural traditions.

For Native American protestors, the resistance against DAPL was about much more than just a pipeline to be built 'in their backyard.' It was a battle in a long fight against internal colonialism and for self-determination and political autonomy:

Standing Rock was a reiteration our traditions of resistance [sic]: the unification of grassroots movements with tribal councils, the treaty councils, the reunification of our Seven Nations, the Oceti Sakowin. Alongside all of these, you saw the best of our diplomatic tradition – 'Lakota' means friend and ally – that's one of our primary tools of resistance. (Estes in Serpe 2019)

Native Americans continue to fight for the land they have lived on since prior to the breaking up of the Great Sioux Reservation of 1868, which had never been formally approved by the people for whom it was created. Continuity rests on the insistence upon treaty rights that guarantee the integrity of the reservation (which includes the availability of clean water). As in many other cases, this added a legal 'front' to the anticolonial struggle and this is why Native Americans occasionally refer to the courts as the battlefields of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Additionally, the fight against internal colonialism has produced new forms of pan-Native action. This is why many indigenous nations in Canada and the USA signed an anti-extractivist manifesto, the Mother Earth Accord, in 2011, announcing coordinated resistance against the exploitation of tar sands oil and shale gas as well as the building of pipelines. Finally, resistance had never stopped – it was maintained also after the 'closing of the frontier,' for example through the spread of the Ghost Dance as an early example of a pan-Native American movement of the late 1880s.<sup>13</sup> Hence, Estes interprets the protest encampments as a "long-awaited reunification of all seven nations of Dakota-, Nakota-, and Lakota-speaking peoples" (2019, 2).

Continuity can be found also in the way in which the protesters did not fight just for themselves but for the land or the non-human living world. The motivation comes from an appreciation of the area – especially the He Sapa (Black Hills) and the Mni Sose as the centre and basis of Lakota life:

In this landscape, water is animated and has agency; it streams as liquid, forms clouds as gas, and even moves earth as solid ice – because it is alive and gives life. If He Sapa is the heart of the world, then Mni Sose is its aorta. This is a Lakota and Indigenous relationship to the physical world. (Estes 2019, 9)

Agreements and correct relations with the non-human world form part of Native American spiritual values. Spirituality, however, in this context, does not solely or primarily relate to religion, but to guidelines for everyday lives, stemming as much

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13 The Ghost Dance movement was initiated by the prophet Wovoka, who predicted that white people would disappear from North American land and Native Americans would be able to maintain or return to their former path of social development. While traditionally, Ghost Dance was seen as an escapist religion, it can also be interpreted as a call for cultural resilience or the attempt to create a revolutionary movement (King 2017, 195-196).



from reflection of the current political situation as from traditional values and ethical considerations. Kyle Powys Whyte calls these guidelines "time-tested Indigenous knowledges that prescribe respectful moral relations with water and other nonhuman beings and entities as vital for securing human safety and wellness" (2017, 156). Mni Wiconi, water protection, in this sense goes beyond care for healthy drinking water and emphasises an ecocentric kinship of human beings – and non-human animals – with water. This understanding of human beings living with the 'land' criticises not only the Obama administration's extractivism and Trumpian climate-change denial but also forms of anthropocentric shallow environmentalism embodied for example by the policies of sustainability and green growth.

Practicing new forms of sociability was another central aspect of the protests against DAPL. The protest camps provided free food, free education, free health care, and free legal aid. They were run on strictly anti-discriminatory and egalitarian principles. Despite conflicts within the camps, and towards the end of the protests also with the reservation's tribal council, they offered insight into what a different form of society could look like. On the one hand, they revived those traditional Native American procedures of political decision-making and social interaction, which had allowed Native Americans to survive 500 years of colonialism. On the other hand, they contributed to a global grassroots movement of prefigurative politics that aims at delinking from and pointing beyond capitalism as a social and economic system.<sup>14</sup>

## 4.2 Delinking from Extractivism

A political economy perspective has to consider four aspects of the protests: capitalism as an expanding system, the restructuring of the world system, class struggles over natural resources, and attempts at delinking from the world system.

The long fight of the settler state USA against Native Americans has always had a capitalist for-profit dimension. In the case of the Lakota, the Fort Laramie treaties were renegotiated or broken to allow settlers to move onto Native American land, to build mail stations on and railway lines across it, to kill the animals living on it, and to exploit its natural resources. The best-known example is the gold rush to the He Sapa (Black Hills):<sup>15</sup> after considerable numbers of prospectors had arrived, the US government legalised gold mining on what was still reservation land in 1877. The Great Sioux Reservation was abolished and divided into six small reservations twelve years later, simultaneously the General Allotment Act introduced individual land ownership on the reservations not only to persuade or force Native Americans to become farmers but also to expropriate the lands that remained after every Native American nuclear family was granted their 160 acres. Later, the Pick-Sloan Plan appropriated Native American land in order to build water reservoirs in the late 1940s. Hence, extractivism is just the latest chapter in a long history of commodification, expropriation, and exploitation of Native American land.<sup>16</sup>

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14 I do not intend to idealise camp life. Estes's account mentions the difficulties and conflicts that inevitably developed (2019, 252).

15 On the struggle for the He Sapa see Estes (2019, 116-117) and King (2017, 431-432).

16 For details on US treaty policies in relation to Native Americans see Prucha (1994).

The intensification of extractivism in North America reacts to changes in the contemporary capitalist world system, where it becomes increasingly difficult for the USA to maintain its central position. Think tanks in the USA already began to warn against the dependency on oil imports after the 'oil crisis' of the early 1970s, but their warnings increased in urgency after 9/11 (Bartolovich 2016, 227). Hence, in the years of the Obama administration, US domestic crude oil production almost doubled. Even though US corporations and governments are still keen on gaining and maintaining control of the global oil supplies, domestic energy autonomy has become a political priority. Intensive cooperation with the Canadian government and Canadian corporations have created a North American network of extraction and processing sites linked by pipelines against which the Native American Mother Earth Accord tries to mobilise.

Extractivism needs water. Fracking consumes immense amounts of water and fracking companies currently deplete the Ogallala Aquifer, one of the world's largest aquifers – extending from Wyoming and South Dakota in the north to Texas in the south and serving as a main source of water for private use and agriculture. At the same time, at Standing Rock the local population relies on drinking water of poor quality from local wells (Brave NoiseCat 2017). The United States are currently witnessing incidents of class struggle over water and the US Defence Department has identified global water scarcity as one of the major geopolitical problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The building of the Oahe Dam, however, had made Native Americans the victims of the commodification of water in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in another way – by flooding their homes.

With regard to both oil and water, Native American land has become linked to a global network of extractive capitalism. As domestic dependent nations, Native Americans are locked into the disadvantaged position of internal peripheries. The protests against DAPL were hence at least symbolic attempts to delink from dependency structures and an exploitative world system and to point to the necessity of creating instead a polycentric world that prioritises the needs of living beings over profits.

## **5. Conclusion: Finding Correct Relations**

Is there anything to be learned from studying an incident of internal colonialism via Indigenous Studies and political economy? In order to show why this is, indeed, the case, I would like to reflect on two questions figuring prominently in discussions on Postcolonial Studies – the issue of universalism and the problem of 'speaking for' others. For this purpose, it is important to highlight the similarities of both approaches – because at first glance, Native American Studies and political economy could hardly be more different. The first is deliberately local and emphasises multiperspectivity. The second claims to be global and postulates universal explanatory power. Nevertheless, they have a lot in common. Both describe and theorise the relationship of centre and periphery. Both identify and analyse the crises, the violence, and the inequality produced by colonialism, imperialism, extractivism, and capitalism. Both portray the workings of hegemonic power and sketch out strategies of resistance and liberation. In

a sense, they both 'provincialise Europe,' but in a way that is proposed by Vivek Chibber in his criticism of subaltern studies:

[T]he way to provincialize Europe is not by continually harping on some unbridgeable gap that separates East from West, but by showing that both parts of the globe are subject to *the same basic forces* and therefore part of *the same basic history*. The forces I refer to are what I have called the two universalisms – the universal logic of capital (suitably defined) and social agents' universal interest in their well-being, which impels them to resist capital's expansionary drive. (2013, 291; original emphases)

Local modes of knowledge (and protests in their name such as Mni Wiconi) thus become a critique in the name of universalism of a capitalism exported from Europe to North America: they defend the universal interest in well-being against the logic of capital, which requires subordinating this interest to the profits gained from extractivism. This ties in with Lazarus and Varma's argument that Eurocentrism should be understood as an ideology justifying colonialist exploitation, which can be criticised from a universalist perspective, rather than as an episteme within, and thus an integral part of, universalism (2009, 315). Furthermore, water protectors express this criticism precisely by 'speaking for' specific others and their universal interest – in this case for the inhabitants of Standing Rock and the non-human living world. An adequate 'speaking for,' as Lazarus and Varma continue, is necessary for political agency (2009, 321). Adequacy, in this case, means that those spoken for are present and part of the process, that those who speak do so with an emphasis on the universal interest in well-being, and that the needs of non-human living beings are taken into consideration. In brief, adequacy here means solidarity.<sup>17</sup>

Appreciating local modes of knowledge as critiques of colonialism and capitalism but also as inspiration for correct relations between humans, non-human beings, and ecosystems might be a simple necessity. So is the criticism of the capitalist world system. The issue is not anymore to only emancipate labour but the whole earth from capital (Estes 2019, 257). Powys Whyte suspects that the white settlers who brought colonialism and capitalism to the USA to this day lack knowledge of the ecological systems with which they live, and thus destroy not only their environments but their own and others' future lives (2017, 165-166). Obviously, this applies to the United States' current government as well as to the administrations of the recent past. Both Indigenous Studies and political economy can be used to confront them with modes of knowledge that challenge the priorities of capitalism with the insistence on correct relations among humans and between humans and the land, i.e. the non-human living world. Smith and Turner similarly emphasise the need to acknowledge the "law of the land" and abandon Western political theory's "triumvirate" – property, capital, and

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17 Lazarus and Varma argue that Postcolonial Theory developed as a reaction to the ending of the 'Bandung' and Third World liberation era, thus propagated radicalism within a hermetic world order and consequently substituted recognition for redistribution as its emancipatory goal (2009, 311-312). In times of climate change and nationalist chauvinisms, the world order does not seem undefeatable but rather on the brink of collapse. This makes the 'speaking for' in a spirit of solidarity even more important.

rights (2013, 284).<sup>18</sup> This task is not limited to the USA, is far from easy, and requires insight from different modes of knowledge as well as prefigurative models.

Combining Indigenous Studies and political economy thus leads to reflections on the conditions for global environmental justice. Local struggles over environmental issues become parts of a conflict over the global commons in a changing economic world system. As central elements of this global commons, land and water are more than resources and commodities. By highlighting the need to protect land and water, Indigenous Studies and political economy emphasise an embeddedness of human beings in the natural world that acknowledges a thoroughly materialist (and class-sensitive) rather than merely spiritual or esoteric ecocentrism. It takes seriously what political economist James O'Connor has called the 'second contradiction of capitalism' (1996): the increasing tension between the productive forces exploiting and destroying the natural world and the conditions of capitalist production that remain limited by the natural world and depend on its continued existence. Neglecting these material limitations is at the core of reckless extractivism and climate change denial and constitutes an example of what biologist and sociologist Ted Benton has identified as "purest idealism" (1992, 63), likely to lead to some ecological catastrophe, affecting different classes in different ways and the least privileged the worst. An Indigenous Studies enriched critique of political economy demonstrates this dead end and simultaneously introduces experiences of, and ideas for, living in a world without capitalism.

This, I suggest, is the academic dimension of what Nick Estes, with whose voice this article began, means when he suggests: "That's the job of revolutionaries in history; we're cheerleaders of the movement, and we have a backward- and a forward-looking perspective" (Estes in Serpe 2019). Perhaps it is the job of Postcolonial Studies scholars too.

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18 To avoid misunderstandings: this is not an argument against 'rights' but against their intimate link with property and capital, which make them entitlements for some and unachievable for others. The law of the land here refers to the correct consideration of human and other needs. For a short discussion of human needs and their relationship with the living world see e.g. Soper (1993).

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