

Thesis: The Influence of Indigenous Peoples' Critique of Commercial Civilization on the European Progressive Narrative and the Rise of Political Left Arguments in Opposition

Abstract The critique of commercial civilization by Indigenous peoples, rooted in their holistic worldviews and resistance to colonial exploitation, significantly shaped the European progressive narrative during the Enlightenment and beyond. By challenging the materialist and individualistic underpinnings of Western commercial society, Indigenous perspectives—often mediated through European intellectuals—contributed to the development of progressive ideals that critiqued capitalism and industrialization. These ideas resonated with the political left, fostering arguments for social equality, environmental stewardship, and anti-imperialism. However, opposition from conservative and liberal factions, who upheld the virtues of commercial progress, created a complex ideological battleground. This thesis explores how Indigenous critiques influenced European thought, the rise of leftist arguments, and the counterarguments that emerged, drawing on historical texts, philosophical works, and contemporary scholarship.

Introduction The encounter between Indigenous peoples and European colonizers was not merely a clash of cultures but a profound intellectual exchange that reshaped Western thought. Indigenous critiques of commercial civilization—emphasizing communal values, ecological balance, and spiritual connections to the land—challenged the European narrative of progress tied to commerce, individualism, and technological advancement. These critiques, often filtered through European observers like missionaries, explorers, and philosophers, found resonance in the Enlightenment's questioning of societal structures, influencing progressive thinkers who sought alternatives to the emerging capitalist order. The political left, emerging in the 19th century, drew on these ideas to advocate for socialism, environmentalism, and anti-colonialism. Yet, these arguments faced opposition from defenders of commercial civilization who viewed it as a marker of progress and superiority. This thesis examines the transmission of Indigenous critiques, their integration into European progressive thought, their role in shaping leftist ideologies, and the counterarguments that upheld commercial civilization.

Chapter 1: Indigenous Critiques of Commercial Civilization Indigenous peoples across the Americas, Africa, and Oceania articulated critiques of European commercial civilization through their resistance to colonial practices and dialogues with European observers. These critiques were grounded in worldviews that prioritized collective well-being, reciprocity with nature, and spiritual connections over material accumulation. For example, the Wendat (Huron) chief Kandiaronk, as recorded by Louis-Armand de Lom d'Arce de Lahontan in *New Voyages to North America* (1703), critiqued European society's

obsession with property and inequality, contrasting it with Indigenous communal practices. Kandiaronk's dialogues highlighted the moral deficiencies of commercial civilization, questioning the pursuit of wealth at the expense of social harmony.

Similarly, the Popol Vuh, a sacred text of the K'iche' Maya, reflects Indigenous cosmologies that view creation as interconnected, challenging the Western dichotomy between humans and nature that underpinned commercial exploitation. In North America, leaders like Neolin and Tenskwatawa advocated for resistance against European materialism, emphasizing spiritual and communal renewal. These critiques were not merely reactionary but offered alternative visions of society that resonated with European intellectuals seeking to reform their own systems.

Sources:

- Lahontan, L.-A. de Lom d'Arce. (1703). *New Voyages to North America*.
- Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Pratt, S. B. (2002). *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy*. Indiana University Press.

Chapter 2: Transmission to European Progressive Thought Indigenous critiques reached Europe through travelogues, missionary reports, and philosophical works, influencing Enlightenment thinkers who were grappling with the social impacts of commercial expansion. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, inspired by accounts of Indigenous societies, developed his concept of the "noble savage" and critiqued the inequalities of commercial society in *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755). While Rousseau's portrayal romanticized Indigenous peoples, it drew on their critiques to challenge European assumptions about progress. Similarly, Denis Diderot's *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* (1772) used Tahitian communalism to critique European materialism and sexual repression.

These ideas laid the groundwork for the progressive narrative, which questioned the moral and social costs of industrialization and capitalism. The Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and universal rights, while often Eurocentric, was paradoxically enriched by Indigenous perspectives that highlighted alternative social models. For instance, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy's Great Law of Peace influenced concepts of democratic governance, as acknowledged by some American and European thinkers, though often uncredited.

Sources:

- Rousseau, J.-J. (1755). *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*.
- Diderot, D. (1772). *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville*.
- Vizenor, G. (1998). *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence*. University of Nebraska Press.

Chapter 3: Influence on the Political Left The 19th century saw the rise of the political left, which drew on progressive critiques of capitalism to advocate for socialism, anarchism, and anti-imperialism. Indigenous critiques, embedded in earlier progressive thought, informed these movements. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), echoed Indigenous communalism by advocating for collective ownership, though they framed it in materialist terms. Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) explicitly referenced Indigenous societies as models of pre-capitalist communalism.

The environmentalist strand of the left also owes a debt to Indigenous worldviews. The Zapatista movement in Mexico, emerging in 1994, combined Indigenous philosophies with leftist resistance against neoliberalism, emphasizing land rights and ecological sustainability. Similarly, Indigenous-led movements like the American Indian Movement (AIM) in the 1970s influenced leftist activism by highlighting sovereignty and resistance to corporate exploitation. These movements reinforced the left's critique of commercial civilization as exploitative and unsustainable, aligning with global anti-colonial struggles.

Sources:

- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1848). *The Communist Manifesto*.
- Engels, F. (1884). *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*.
- Sánchez-Antonio, J. (2022). *Zapatista Autonomy and Indigenous Resistance*. Schools for Chiapas.

Chapter 4: Opposition to Leftist Arguments The rise of leftist arguments inspired by Indigenous critiques faced significant opposition from defenders of commercial civilization. Conservative thinkers like Edmund Burke, in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), argued that commercial progress and hierarchical order were essential for societal stability. Liberal economists like Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), championed markets as engines of prosperity, dismissing communal models as primitive.

In the 20th century, neoliberalism further entrenched the defense of commercial civilization, with thinkers like Friedrich Hayek arguing in *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) that centralized planning (inspired by leftist communalism) threatened individual liberty.

Organizations like the Citizens Equal Rights Alliance (CERA) opposed Indigenous sovereignty movements, viewing them as challenges to national unity and economic progress. These counterarguments framed commercial civilization as a universal good, marginalizing Indigenous and leftist critiques as backward or utopian.

Sources:

- Burke, E. (1790). *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.
- Smith, A. (1776). *The Wealth of Nations*.
- Hayek, F. (1944). *The Road to Serfdom*.
- Southern Poverty Law Center. (n.d.). *Citizens Equal Rights Alliance*..

Chapter 5: Contemporary Relevance and Ongoing Debates Today, Indigenous critiques continue to influence progressive and leftist movements, particularly in the context of climate change and globalization. The Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth (2010), adopted by Indigenous organizations, challenges the commodification of nature inherent in commercial civilization. Movements like Land Back in North America draw on Indigenous principles to advocate for reparations and ecological justice, resonating with leftist calls for systemic change.

However, opposition persists. Neoliberal policies and corporate interests resist Indigenous and leftist demands, framing them as obstacles to economic growth. The tension between these visions reflects a broader struggle over the legacy of commercial civilization and the possibility of alternative futures. This thesis argues that acknowledging Indigenous contributions to progressive thought is essential for addressing contemporary challenges like inequality and environmental degradation.

Sources:

- International Institute for Sustainable Development. (2022). *Indigenous Peoples: Defending an Environment for All*.
- National Geographic. (2025). *Native Americans in Colonial America*.

Conclusion: The critique of commercial civilization by Indigenous peoples, transmitted through European intellectual channels, profoundly influenced the progressive narrative and the rise of political left arguments. By challenging the moral and ecological foundations of capitalism, Indigenous perspectives enriched Enlightenment thought and inspired leftist ideologies that continue to shape global debates. However, defenders of commercial civilization have consistently opposed these critiques, creating an ongoing ideological conflict. Recognizing the Indigenous roots of progressive and leftist thought not

only enriches historical understanding but also offers pathways for addressing modern crises. Future research should explore how Indigenous knowledge can further inform global movements for justice and sustainability.

Bibliography

- Burke, E. (1790). *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.
- Diderot, D. (1772). *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville*.
- Engels, F. (1884). *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*.
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