

Yes! Throw that baby out with
the bath water: Further
reflections on the ethic of
uncertainty and settler futurity

2022-11-13

A couple of days after the From Embers podcast aired the episode, “Quebec Nationalism and Settler Futurity – Refusing Innocence,” someone posted a thoughtful and engaging reflection about this discussion. As one of the guests on this episode, I’ve taken some time to sit with the concerns shared in the post and decided to converse further with the reflections offered on the topics of uncertainty and settler futurity.

When talking about uncertainty, I realize now I ought to better qualify what I mean when I talk about it, so I’m grateful for the possibility to engage further with this notion in relation to anti-colonial solidarity organizing. First, I think uncertainty itself is a value-neutral concept. It is the stories that are projected onto this concept that ascribe it to a positive or negative value. Second, when I spoke of uncertainty in the From Embers interview, I did not simply mean that uncertainty implies an absence of initiative taking or experimenting. What I meant, but failed to clarify was that uncertainty can offer a guiding ethic to navigate through the tightly wound knot of colonial logic and reason. More specifically, to engage with an ethic of uncertainty is to engage with a commitment towards the way one attempts to actualize the visions and dreams they and their people want to see come to fruition. So, in practice, for example, I would remain open to my vision or analysis being wrong or disoriented, and I’d examine how my willingness to make something happen might be shaped by colonial logic, reason, or justified by its rationale. Third, an ethic of uncertainty does not preclude a willingness to build, dream, experiment, and/or vision otherwise, though it does ask of one to be willing to burn it down, walk away, and start over if such things no longer serve the broader goals of liberation via the routes of abolition and decolonization. This is not an easy path, and I often scrape my knees because I stumble all the time.

I argue for an ethic of uncertainty when grappling with the concept of settler futurity because of the possibilities it provides to destroy the trappings of the current settler-colonial society. I admit, unnuanced, the position of uncertainty appears to function only as a negationist position with regards to settler futurity, thus escaping an inherent tension of what and/or how one can – as a white settler, for example – fight against various forms of exploitation and domination beyond creating ruins. Where lies the sources of sustenance, nourishment, and healing if in such a framework of struggle visions of the futures are neglected? Certainly, such a negationist position avoids positing any values that draw a line as to what a white, anarchist settler might be for, and thus, a stance of uncertainty can appear to stand in for literally anything. And so, this is why I offer a response: an ethic of uncertainty is not intended to reduce people to a puddle of nihilism, though I see why the author expresses those concerns. I think such an ethic is a tool to navigate the deeply ingrained ways that settler-futurity holds many of us in dead-end, toxic categories. Settler futurity is intrinsically linked to the continuance of the settler-colonial-capitalist paradigm that shapes the daily intricacies of people’s lives across

North America.

At the end of his book, “The Nation On No Map,” Anderson makes some concluding arguments as to why revolutionary change will never arrive via state apparatuses. He writes “a lesson here is that abolishing or readjusting one aspect of the systematic state violence we face [as Black peoples] is never enough; it allows oppressive structures and violence room to expand and become more effective in other areas” (p. 180). There is a parallel argument to be made here about settler futurity and settler colonialism; in that, trying to hold onto a notion of a future rooted within policies, legislation, and governing strategies designed to displace, exploit, conquer and subdue permits the colonial-capitalist Canadian state and society to adapt, recuperate and streamline its forms of repression, control, and exploitation. There is nothing recuperable about settler futurity, and holding onto any part of this notion while fighting forms of exploitation and domination seems to sabotage any real chance at liberation. To this point, I turn to Anderson again where in talking about the futility of state reform, he declares “The map, the nation, and the state must go. We did not draw them, and they do not serve us. They never did. To exist on their map in any way can only diminish us and undermine everything that we’re capable of” (p. 184). Whereas Anderson is directly appealing to Black peoples and their respective struggles against the United States, this appeal also resonates with the reasons to discard the notion of settler futurity: it will always keep those who defend it tied to a settler colonial paradigm. And for this reason, this baby needs to be thrown out with the bath water. There is nothing of value to preserve from this position.

Turning now to the content of the post, the first excerpt I wish to engage states, *“I think more people increasingly feel we now live in “uncertain times,” amidst major threats to the global neoliberal order (predominantly coming from a resurgent right wing nationalism), as well as the existential threat of climate change and associated events. And while this uncertainty opens up many possibilities for anarchist intervention, I also believe it is leading a lot of people to embrace either reactionary positions or apathetic-passive nihilism.”*

There are many spaces, locations, and social settings where a struggle or front-line might emerge. My interest specifically in this discussion about settler futurity is talking with, and to anarchists about our relationship to the concept of settler futurity. I’m less interested at this juncture in how to engage with a wider scope of people about this question because I realize even amongst anarchists the concept of settler futurity is a stumbling block. In particular, I’m interested in hearing how anarchists grapple with such a concept amongst their peers, their networks of organizing, and in their lifestyles. While the point raised in the above excerpt is a considerable one, I find it deflects from the question I’m posing specifically to anarchists: that is, what does it mean, for settler-anarchists, to fathom in their respective struggles and world-building a future that does not include settler-futurity? For me,

this is where an ethic of uncertainty plays an important role.

In the second excerpt I want to engage, the author states: *“In this context [uncertain times], I think it’s actually very important for anarchists to emphasize possible futures that are neither technocratic green authoritarianism nor reactionary nationalism ... I do believe there’s a way to do this while weaving anti-colonial solidarity into the core of our efforts, allowing for a multiplicity of futures, avoiding blueprints, etc... And while this path still holds a massive amount of uncertainty, it doesn’t throw out the idea of “settler futurity” altogether. Otherwise I worry that the whole thing ultimately funnels back to strategies founded on white guilt and “taking leadership” that have been effectively critiqued by anarchists and indigenous comrades and increasingly appropriated by liberals over the past decade or so.”*

I agree that anarchists need to imagine futures absent of authoritarianism and reactionary nationalism. Though I would like to understand more about how the author views the possibility of a multiplicity of futures that weave anti-colonial solidarity into its core. I want to understand more about the author’s reticence to let go of settler-futurity – what ideas are clung to and why? Beyond the concerns of reactionary nationalism and technocratic authoritarianism, what holds the author in place to defend any notion of settler futurity?

I’m reminded of some excerpts from the Witch’s Child that poetically address the existential dread, grief, and longing of the descendants of those ancestors (understood in present-day as white people) who became rootless throughout centuries of war, monarchies, and state governance across Europe. That, in turn, led their descendants to drift onto other peoples’ territories via imperialism and the governing structures of settler-colonial capitalism. This text also points out that by remaining tethered to such worlds, we continue to enact the violence that might have once been enacted on our ancestors so long ago:

“It is the tragedy of some in this world to be uprooted, of others, to be rootless. This is the story of the rootless ones. Your bones already know the story, though your mind does not yet understand it. One day, in the waking world, this story will come back to you.” p.3

“They needed our help in these new wars of conquest, and above all, they needed to prevent our defection. So they told us we were white, which was immutably different from being black, or being [Indigenous]. The lords and their priests, cops, and explorers could not build new cages fast enough, so they built categories, and taught us that we were born into them, and could never choose who we were. And who we were was an army, mobilized to assault all those who still had roots in the world.” p.8

“So they negotiated with us and gave us some privileges, gave us some fancy clothes so we could pretend to be like them, and they let us decorate our lives with their abundance of objects. But more and more are beginning to realize that this project we’re invited to participate in is the war against all of us. It allows us anything but mutiny. It keeps us alive as long as we do not nourish ourselves. It demands only our complicity

ity in this constant uprooting, and the suppression of those who still remember their roots.” p.4

The promise of settler futurity is intimately tied to the infrastructural, political, and emotional dimensions of the settler-colonial state. Settler futurity offers a kind of illusive certainty for the category of people described above who in being rootless were promised a world of privilege in exchange for their complicity and submissiveness. This is why in the podcast interview, we call for a refusal of settler futurity: defending such a concept is a form of complicity that settler anarchists need to examine very closely in the contexts they engage.

This brings me to the last part of the second excerpt posted above where the author writes, *“And while this path still holds a massive amount of uncertainty, it doesn’t throw out the idea of “settler futurity” altogether. Otherwise I worry that the whole thing ultimately funnels back to strategies founded on white guilt and “taking leadership” that have been effectively critiqued by anarchists and indigenous comrades and increasingly appropriated by liberals over the past decade or so.”*

In the podcast interview, I talked about the ways anarchism offers points of connection with liberatory traditions that are anarchic in practice but do not culturally identify as anarchists as understood within Euro-American circles. Further, the reason why I emphasize this notion of “points of connection” is because it encourages a person to connect to another’s struggles based on political overlaps that make sense to come together on. For me, having a clear sense of my points of connection regarding solidarity provides a basis to a) be clear about how, why, and what I’m showing up for; and b) examine whether or not the reasons I’m showing up, acting up, etc. stem from episodes of white guilt – which is, in truth, a real waste of everyone’s time because it just ends up re-centering whiteness.

As for the notion of “taking leadership”, I agree with the author that this is an important dynamic that anarchists need to navigate on frontlines and in the spaces that form to support them. This is tricky terrain because, on the one hand, we don’t arrive as blank slates, we come to struggle with our own experiences, understandings, and analysis; on the other hand, as a comrade shared with me fairly recently, our notions of “taking leadership” are situated in a very particular socio-cultural and historical understanding of authority and hierarchy. What we (as white anarchists) might see as solely a practice of hierarchy and authority might also miss the greater socio-cultural context that those practices of leadership come out of. I’m not saying that Indigenous peoples don’t have structures of hierarchy and authority in their respective models of governance. There is plenty of that to navigate (and beyond the scope of the point I’m trying to articulate here). What I am saying is this, the way one shows up to a political struggle (often situated in socio-cultural circumstances different than one’s own) requires a relational understanding. This kind of understanding includes considerations, such as: having clarity about the terms of the invitation to show up; maintaining a sense of integrity while balancing

one's practices with the practices that are present; being aware of certain anarchist stereotypes (i.e. the obnoxious white anarchists who seem like they just showed up to riot), being open to disagreement about some things while knowing where one is unwilling to compromise on other things, and from there, know when to build relationships or not. The above reflections are in no way an exhaustive list: they are simply some things I have been thinking about lately. Regardless, the critique about "taking leadership" is an important one. At the same time, it's one among many aspects to consider when entering into a relationship of solidarity as a white anarchist.

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