Borrowing from the Past: Aboriginal Activism

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“We are a group about human rights and not a justice group. Because justice is something that comes from the government. We are opposed to the government.”

It was the beginning of my research with Aboriginal activists in the small, North Queensland city of Townsville. I arrived at St Therese’s, an Aboriginal Catholic church, to attend an Indigenous Human Rights meeting with about twenty other people. I took a seat at a table and tried not to stare at the Aboriginal-inspired religious iconography. As a relatively new arrival to Australia, from what I considered a ‘mainstream’ white family in upstate New York, I felt somewhat out of my depth. At that first meeting in May 2007, Gracelyn, the chairperson of the group, gave a quick rundown of the group’s ideology. The government was sometimes a good source of funding, she said, but we wouldn’t seek any financial assistance from them because, as she put it, “We are opposed to the government.”

I was pleased with my choice of this activist group. Gracelyn’s words convinced me that the Human Rights Group operated from a radical ideological position. Despite the cultural differences between us, it seemed that we had a common view of power structures. As an undergraduate student in the United States I was active in feminist, anti-corporate globalization, and vegan issues. I had attended many meetings at which discussion of ideology, strategy, and tactics was prioritized. We were all deeply concerned that ends and means were compatible. We worked together, challenging each other, so that all our positions were strengthened. It seemed that the Townsville Indigenous Human Rights Group would operate in the same way. I assumed, therefore, that as a critically engaged researcher, I could both participate as an activist while learning from, and questioning, the ideas entailed and the ways in which those ideas were implemented.

At this time we were only weeks away from the trial of Senior-Sergeant Chris Hurley, a police officer who was held responsible for the 2004 death in custody of an Aboriginal man on Palm Island, 50 kilometers north of Townsville. The death had originally been ruled accidental, and no charges were to be laid. When this was announced to the Palm Island Aboriginal community, it led to significant social unrest, during which the police station and courthouse were burnt down. Following the riot, forty-three Palm Islanders were arrested in early morning raids by special ‘tactical police’. Only five of those arrested were eventually tried, and only Lex Wotton, the alleged ‘ring leader’, was found guilty.

I was surprised when I arrived at the next meeting of the Human Rights Group. Two police officers were sitting at the table with the activists. I had thought that the Human Rights Group was opposed to the Government but now Gracelyn explained that we would be working with these men. One of them was himself Indigenous, a Cross-Cultural Liaison Officer. The Group planned to organize a protest at the time of Hurley’s trial and the police officers had been given the task of ensuring that the planned demonstrations would run smoothly. To me, however, the presence of police ran counter to Gracelyn’s initial statements of ideology.

Hurley’s trial was an historic, politically, and emotionally charged event for the Aboriginal community in North Queensland. It was the first time that an Australian police officer had been charged with manslaughter following a death in custody. The charges were laid only after months of protesting and lobbying in Townsville and elsewhere in Australia.

The Townsville Group expected that bushloads of protesters would come from far and wide. Our group was trying to sort out what to do with all these people. Where would they stay? What would they eat? And, most importantly, what would the protests outside of the courthouse look like? There was fear that the protests could turn violent. Gracelyn suggested that the violence would be initiated by police, most likely undercover, and used to justify mass arrests that would make the Indigenous community look
unruly and dangerous. She said that this had happened several years earlier when she joined a protest in Sydney, far to the south. She did not want to see that event repeated. And so we worked with the police, even though, ironically, we were protesting against their institution. It was necessary to ensure that everything was peaceful and orderly.

In the end, however, there were dozens of protesters, rather than hundreds. Most were from Townsville and Palm Island and only a few had traveled from the capital cities. And the protests remained peaceful. Each morning began with a Christian prayer, and a call to the ancestors that was expressed through dance and a smoking ceremony.

Senior-Sergeant Hurley was acquitted. But there was a feeling of numbness, rather than of anger. I had expected different sentiments. The earlier statements of opposition to the State had been so unequivocal. There were vocal protests against the entire system of policing and justice in Australia that it was asserted, unfairly targeted Indigenous people. I was aware that Indigenous people are seventeen times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Indigenous people in Australia. So I agreed with what the activists were saying. I too thought that the police officer deserved to be held accountable for the death. I too thought that he deserved to go to jail. I was puzzled at what seemed to be a lack of focus—a lack of determination—among the Townsville activists. I thought they would be angry, and that they would demonstrate their anger. But they were numb, and quiet, and they dispersed.

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It was several months before I again heard from the Group. The Christmas holidays had intervened and everyone was taking a rest after a hectic period of activism. After New Year, however, I wondered what was happening and worried about my planned research. If the Group had disbanded, or lost interest, my research would be jeopardized.

I attempted to make contact by phone. But it was not until the 26th of January that anyone returned my calls. It was Gracelyn. “Theresa,” she said. “We’re having an Invasion Day March today at 10.00 am at the Strand. You should come down, and bring as many people as you can with you.” The phone call was brief and to the point, as were most of my conversations with Gracelyn.

In Australia, the 26th of January marks Australia Day. It is a public holiday that commemorates the arrival of the First Fleet in Sydney Harbour in 1788. Most Australians celebrate with barbecues, trips to the beach, and games of cricket. To Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, however, the day holds different significance. Some call it “Invasion Day.” Others call it “Survival Day.” For Australia’s Indigenous people there is not much to celebrate. And for more than eighty years, on January 26th, they have organized rallies, marches, and other demonstrations in cities and towns across the country. Their actions serve to protest white invasion, celebrate Indigenous survival, or call for reconciliation with mainstream Australia.

Now Gracelyn wanted me to join a march. I headed for the Strand—Townsville’s popular beach—where the rally would begin. The scene was disorderly. The crowd was small and people milled about, unsure of what they were meant to do or when things would start. There were two Indigenous dance groups who had come with family members. The dancers wore traditional dress and body paint. There were also a few members of the Human Rights Group.

It was 11.30 am before the march started. “Should we chant,” people asked? “What should we chant? Perhaps a silent march would be more effective. Or maybe we should all sing.” Nobody was sure. Nobody seemed to know what our main message should be. That had not been discussed when the march was planned. It had simply been accepted that there would be a march on January 26th because there always was a march on this day. But no one had considered what this particular march was trying to express or to accomplish.

About thirty people participated. Someone had brought a drum and we marched to its beat. One marcher sang quietly to himself. Some occasionally shouted to onlookers: “We have survived. Australia has a black history. Always was, always will be Aboriginal land.” We reached the Strand Amphitheatre, sat on the risers, and looked around at the bystanders. It was midday, and it was crowded. The Strand is a popular destination for families, and for tourists, especially on public holidays, and the Amphitheatre is close to several takeaway restaurants.

Although some may have been there to eat their lunch rather than participate in Invasion Day, we had a substantial audience. But, for a while, no one stood one to speak.

Eventually Jai, a young Aboriginal man, stood and thanked everyone for coming. Representatives from the two groups of Traditional Owners followed. They welcomed the crowd to the space where we had all assembled. Their brief speeches were followed by traditional dances.

And then Jai stood again. He pointed to a cardboard sign that hung around his neck. The sign was a replica ‘king plate.’ He said that, in the past, white settlers gave some Indigenous people metallic, half-moon shaped ‘king plates’ that, purportedly, identified those individuals as decision-makers for their area. This gave the impression that settlers were negotiating with the original inhabitants. But, Jai continued, this kind of hierarchy
and leadership was unfamiliar to Aboriginal groups. Rather, decisions were made collectively by a group of elders.

The 'king plates,' Jai explained, revealed that European settlers had little understanding of Aboriginal society; they were often used as a means of co-opting Aboriginal land. By wearing this sign on Australia Day, Jai sought to highlight the hidden history that white people either did not know about or did not admit to. He said that his people have been held in chains for a long time. And then he tore the sign from his neck to symbolize the breaking of the chains that were holding Aboriginal people back. “It’s time to move forward,” he announced.

In social movements such as the anarchist-based, anti-corporate globalization movement, there is almost always a clear ideological position and a clear strategic intent. Individuals may differ with respect to ideology but, if so, they are likely to be clear and outspoken about their own positions. A group's overarching standpoint is reached through extensive discussions about ideology, strategy, goals, and the means of achieving those goals. But this was not the case among Aboriginal activists in Townsville. At first sight the Aboriginal movement seemed disorganized; populated by activists who did not know what they wanted, nor what they should do. But, as happens so often, first appearances can be deceptive. The explanation was far less simple.

Janine provided part of the explanation. An Aboriginal woman in her thirties, she was employed in the Human Resources department of the local University. I asked her one day what her ultimate goal was. What would her ideal world look like? What would it take for her to stop being an activist?

She responded quickly, though haltingly.

“My utopia,” she said, “would be a socialist society. You know, government funded, government controlled, centralized decision making. Where, you know ... the whole sort of ... sharing of resources, and equitable distribution of results.”

To Janine, however, this sense of a desirable future world was a ‘no-brainer’ – Aboriginal people had always worked collectively. A society that worked in this way just made sense. Why would anyone want anything different? Later, however, she expressed views on what Indigenous people should be doing to improve their status.

“Whilst I would love it for Aboriginal people to have their own sovereignty, and their own government systems, and things like that ... we’re living in a society now where we’re not the dominant culture. And ... we have to participate in what's going on around us and the rest of the society.”

Initially, it seemed that Janine was contradicting herself. On the one hand, she wanted a utopia that was fundamentally grounded in pre-existing Aboriginal values like collectivism. On the other hand, she felt that Indigenous people should acknowledge, and comply with, the economic values of the dominant white society that now enveloped them. To Janine, however, there was no contradiction. She was being wisely pragmatic. She was acknowledging that there was a mismatch between what activists want and what they feel they can actually get. She was saying that rather than sticking to their ideals it was necessary to compromise and to do things that might actually achieve advances.

Janine's comments, and my own reflections on protests that I had attended, pointed to a different understanding of Aboriginal activism in North Queensland. They had initially seemed so disorganized. But now, I understood that their apparent disorganization had significant advantages. They were flexible and were able to respond to the immediacy of situations. In both these ways they were borrowing from, and continuing, deeply engrained characteristics of Aboriginal ecological and social practice; characteristics that had ensured survival on a harsh continent through 60,000 years or more. In the present era, as activists, they were never pre-committed to a unitary ideological position or a set of tactics that might prove inappropriate in particular circumstances. Rather, as the need arose, they could switch from a confrontational to a cooperative style of protest and campaigning.

Aboriginal activists could adapt to circumstances. They could treat 'Australia Day' as a protest against White Invasion, as a celebration of Indigenous survival, as an opportunity to promote reconciliation or to highlight a specific, topical, issue such as deaths of Aborigines while in custody.

They could, as Gracelyn did, assert their opposition to Government one week and work with police to ensure non-violent outcomes the next. In the emotionally charged atmosphere surrounding the trial of a police officer they could adopt a low profile, maintain a peaceful stance, and do nothing that might inflame opposition. Or, when they judged the situation to be favorable, they could promote more radical messages.

In Australia, Labor Day is an annual holiday that celebrates past economic and social achievements of workers. It originated with workers successfully campaigning for an eight-hour day – eight hours of work, eight hours of recreation, and eight hours of rest. In cities and towns across Australia people from many different groups march to-
together, to proclaim both their own interests and their solidarity with other groups.

For Townsville Aboriginal activists, Labor Day in 2008 was a central event in the ongoing campaign for Stolen Wages. Until the 1970s, Aboriginal workers in Queensland had their wages paid into a trust fund administered by a local protector – usually the local police officer. Workers were allocated small amounts each week and had to make a special application if they wished to buy more expensive items such as new clothing or Christmas gifts. Most of the money, though, remained in the trust fund and has never been paid to workers.

In planning meetings before the march, the Aboriginal activists were joined by a non-Indigenous union organizer. “This is an issue of wages,” he told them. “It has nothing to do with rights.” He encouraged them to keep their message simple, to focus on the fact that wages remained unpaid, and that the government was in debt to the workers.

The activists, however, had different ideas. They thought that this event might attract attention to a variety of causes and concerns. They would be in the spotlight and they wanted to include as many issues as possible. The Union organizer spoke strongly and persuasively. The activists grudgingly accepted the need to stay focused on the issue of wages. But they were not willing to restrict their protest solely to a union issue. I joined them in painting a brightly colored banner that proclaimed: “STOLEN WAGES = SLAVE LABOUR.” Our union ally deemed this to be a bad idea. But the banner proved one of the most striking in the march. It generated much positive feedback from non-Indigenous participants. They said that the message it broadcast was clear and meaningful.

At the end of the parade, hundreds of union members from the Townsville area gathered in a park and listened to speakers on a number of issues. Aboriginal activists took the opportunity to speak more strongly than they usually did in public situations. Max Lenoy spoke of the relationship between the trade unions and Aboriginal activists. He reminded union members of their radical roots: “There’s been an injustice. And the one group that has stood up and helped Indigenous workers to gain their rights has been the unions. So I want to, on behalf of all of us who recognize that, I want to thank you as unions for helping us out.”

Rights Group comrades” for donating money to the cause.

In different contexts, and at different times, Indigenous activists in Townsville expressed their concerns in a variety of ways. At ‘community meetings,’ where there were few non-Indigenous attendees, conversation was frequently fiery. People differed about the best way to change the system. Heated debates flared up between those who advocated direct confrontation and those who advocated a calmer approach. But in practice they were flexible and opportunistic. If they judged the situation to be appropriate – as in the Stolen Wages case where there was significant non-Indigenous support – then they were forthright in both their public arguments and demands. If they judged the situation to be deeply sensitive – as in the trial of the police officer where non-Indigenous support was lacking or ambiguous – then their public profile was more conciliatory. They chose to move slowly toward ultimate goals. They could mark time with minor successes that, little by little, contributed to those goals. Successes, even small ones, are important. They keep spirits high; they facilitate retention and recruitment of members to the group. So what, at first glance, seemed to be a disorganized movement is, in practice, strategic flexibility.

About the author: Theresa Petray completed her doctoral dissertation on Aboriginal activism in February 2011. She now works part-time as a Lecturer in Sociology at James Cook University in Townsville, Queensland, where she continues research on activism.

Activists clash with courthouse security. [Photograph: Theresa Petray]