

Unlearning privilege, unlocking usefulness: Non-Aboriginal people's solidarity with Aboriginal struggles for land and self-determination

by Clare Land

Bio: Clare Land is active in political solidarity with Aboriginal struggles for land rights and self-determination in the south east of Australia. Her experiences and discussions with Aboriginal community leaders have inspired her reflections on and studies of the politics of solidarity, culminating in the publication of a book, *Decolonizing solidarity: Dilemmas and directions for supporters of Indigenous struggles*. Clare is often called on as a resource by activists seeking to develop their own practice of solidarity.

Aboriginal people have long encountered difficulties in imparting the politics of solidarity to active and prospective supporters of political struggles in the south east of Australia. Conversations about solidarity and how to do it are often met with resistance and defensiveness. Central to this difficulty is that white non-Indigenous people working in the Fourth World context - like professionals from the Global North working in development aid in Southern contexts - need to unlearn aspects of their own education in order to learn the skill of supporting a community's self-determined agenda.

As a white, non-Aboriginal person who aspires to support Aboriginal peoples' struggles for justice, I began this learning and unlearning process within social movements in 1998, and undertook a PhD from 2006-2012 to continue and deepen it.

Among the first Aboriginal activists and educators I met were Gary Foley, Lillian Holt and the late Lisa Bellear; they prompted me to attend to questions of how to act in solidarity and what supporters need to know to inform their acting.

In Foley's view, the greatest areas of 'underlying tension and dispute' between Aboriginal people and their non-Aboriginal supporters, concern the following:

"Often without even realising it, many non-Kooris [non-Aboriginal people] are patronising and paternalistic in their dealings with Koori people... Failure to properly understand the importance of 'Aboriginal control of Aboriginal affairs' to indigenous people can create tension where white supporters think they know better than the Koori community." (Foley, 1999)

Long-time Aboriginal community campaigners have commented on the burden of educating generation upon generation of prospective supporters. Foley has commented: 'There is a significant problem out there in the community with those who like to think that they support us... in terms of educating people as to how they need to be as human beings, and as political activists.' And for Robbie Thorpe, 'Educating people one on one [has] taken up a lot of our energy and resources'. Therefore, it is important that non-Aboriginal people aspiring to work in solidarity with Aboriginal people avoid exacerbating this sense of burden by finding ways to educate themselves and each other. Many people have done this kind of work before, so it should be possible to reach out to people and groups with more experience, to find out what they learned and how they work.

The beginning of my learning process produced three key convictions, thanks to Foley:

- that the most basic way for a non-Aboriginal person to demonstrate respect for Aboriginal people is to learn what has happened in this country.
- don't do anything unless you've been asked to do it. For instance, don't go around suggesting projects. It is important for Aboriginal people to initiate their own political activities.
- in order to ever be asked to do anything, you need to spend time around, and be known to, Aboriginal people. Foley told the solidarity collective I was part of to attend the fortnightly barbecues that were held at the Aboriginal student centre at the university where I was studying, so I did.

In the second year of my learning process I was introduced to considerations around whiteness and privilege:

- Interrogation of whiteness: Lillian Holt encouraged the solidarity group I was involved in to 'look

within and own their whiteness as opposed to looking without and seeing blackness’.

- Owing racism: Speaking about whiteness assisted each of us to recognise ourselves as implicated in the relations of racism. An Australian solidarity activist of Indian background owned that while she was not cosmetically white, whiteness ‘had’ her.
- History repeats: Gary Foley pointed out that paternalism and racism had bedevilled some of the most famous Indigenous rights campaigns in Australian history. The same issues replayed in campaign after campaign.

I have since written a PhD and a book on the politics of solidarity, and that process of research and writing has produced the following insights:

Solidarity needs to be decolonized: non-Aboriginal supporters of Aboriginal struggles need to avoid colonising those struggles. And solidarity needs to be directed towards decolonization: the repatriation of land and people. Supporters need to interrogate their/our social location, privileges and motivations and continue to reflect on our practice with the help of colleagues, and with accountability to Aboriginal political actors. As supporters undertake critical self-reflection, some important questions to ponder are: Where are you from? What is your culture? How do you know you are emerging towards non-racism? Do you want something in exchange for work as a supporter? The process of self-reflection depends in large part on the ways in which privilege and oppression intersect in your life. If you have had a conventional, elitist education there will be more to unlearn. But non-Koori activist and academic Bob Boughton also emphasises the centrality of the ability and willingness to reflect:

“If you are a well-educated, professional non-Indigenous person, or someone from outside the Global South, then you come with a whole lot of expectations about your own power; and if you are not reflective enough about that then it can take you a very long time to unlearn it. But if you are reflective about it, if you are helped to be reflective about it, it will happen quite quickly.” (Bob Boughton)

It is important for non-Indigenous people to develop a moral and political framework through which to be supportive of Indigenous people. There is a wide consensus that actions based on the desire to help the needy are not productive because this reflects and perpetuates the idea that Aboriginal people are objects of charity rather than subjects with political agency. A sense of the bigger picture – of the overarching economic conditions and logics which produce inequality and which drive colonialism – informs a more acute analysis of the problem and guides more powerful, subversive actions.

People with multiple privileges such as middle class, white non-Indigenous people need to interrogate the shape of our/their lives, in order to identify the many ways in which this reflects white privilege and ongoing colonization. With that awareness, privileges can be redeployed. Asking yourself what the limits are to what you would do in solidarity may help to uncover sites of complicity and potential resistance.

Insights into the politics of solidarity in Fourth World contexts can also shed light on international development practice. Perhaps the most useful role of a privileged outsider working in development aid is familiarity with the cultures and processes of the government or donor system – the ability to be a bridge to financial resources for community initiatives. As Bob Boughton, who has worked in both contexts, suggests:

You know the codes, the rules, the ‘secret language’ of the bureaucracy, the way to talk to people. There are lots of things that people like us can be used for because we are like people from the inside, like people on the other side of the frontier.

Further, the contrasting economic conditions of the aid worker and the community are interdependent, and a precise understanding of this interdependence will inform how these conditions are to be addressed and ultimately changed. Crucially, political and historical analysis is required by the power-sensitive outsider, not just cultural information.

Privileged outsiders aspiring to conduct power sensitive solidarity and development cooperation need to go through a process of critical self-reflection, and to develop a broad historical and political perspective to inform our/their work. Seeking an ever-clearer view of the existing power relations and your place within them is integral to finally transforming them.

Notes

The term Fourth World in this article refers to indigenous people living in First World ('developed' and capitalist) countries, such as Australia.

The statements by Gary Foley and Robbie Thorpe derive from speeches recorded at the launch of Clare Land's book. The statement by Bob Boughton derives from an interview conducted by Clare Land.

Literature

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