

“THE LAY OF THE LAND” BY ARTHUR MANUEL.



Timeline of the usurpation of Secwepemc Lands: a specific example to illustrate a global Indigenous history of land theft.

1778 British Land Claim = Captain James Cook, a British explorer at the service of the Empire, sailed along the coasts of B.C. Following the doctrine of discovery, by sailing past Fraser River mouth, he claimed all the lands in its watershed, including Secwepemc lands

A legacy of struggle for Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Born in the Neskonlith community of the Secwepemc nation, located on the Interior Plateau of British Columbia, Arthur Manuel was part of a larger, long-lasting, and intergenerational history of struggle for the rights, respect, and sovereignty of Indigenous peoples, whose lands were stolen as a result of British colonization of the Pacific Northwest.

The doctrine of discovery as a fiction legitimizing European appropriation of Indigenous lands.

According to Manuel, European colonists used the “legal fiction” of the doctrine of discovery, a Christian law that authorized explorers to claim lands that were not yet conquered by other Christians as if they were vacant and empty (terra nullius) in the name of their sovereign, to appropriate lands inhabited by Indigenous peoples since time immemorial. When Europeans encountered First Nations, they declared them “non-human” to swiftly get around the inconvenience and turn lands into “British possessions”, without any consent or consultation with Indigenous peoples living on the territory.

“The doctrine of discovery remained because it was a legal fig leaf they could use to cover naked thievery”

Early 1800s European traders = Following British claims to their lands, Manuel’s people experienced encounters with traders such as Simon Fraser. In the beginning, Indigenous-European relations were cordial and based on mutual tolerance. Secwepemc people traded with Europeans and treated them as guests, but gradually traders came in larger numbers, started to settle, and began to act as if they owned the places, “as lords”, thus souring relations with Indigenous peoples. This process of using native hospitality to settle and betray First Nations is a common experience for Indigenous peoples around the world, and is still ongoing today as part of the “effort to extinguish our title to the land through force or one-sided negotiations.”

1860s Gold Rush = Europeans came to the Pacific Northwest looking for precious metals. Consequently, the discovery of the Cariboo gold fields created a rush of prospectors who crossed Secwepemc territory. Tensions arose, especially because Secwepemc peoples were already “under great stress because European diseases were sweeping through [their] country.”

1862 Neskonlith Douglas Reserve = Because unrest in Secwepemc territory was menacing the “new mining wealth”, a meeting was organized between an emissary of Governor James Douglas, and Chief Neskonlith, who had the reputation to be a “tough and uncompromising leader” and represented the four bands around the Shuswap Lakes. Thanks to the Chief’s determination, the negotiations ended with the delimitation of a 1 million acres territory, for “exclusive Secwepemc use”. This agreement was later on broken as colonial authorities failed to restrain settlements on the pre-delimited zone. This betrayal led to a reduction of Secwepemc territory to barely 7000 acres. “In an astounding act of racism”, colonial powers gave away 160 acres of Indigenous lands without consent to settlers who applied, and only allocated 20 acres for Indigenous families.

1910 Laurier Memorial = This declaration was presented to Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier on August 25, 1910, by the Interior Chiefs during a ministerial visit to Kamloops. Labeled a “memorial” because it represented “our collective memories of our history with the settlers”, the document was meant to highlight that Indigenous peoples remembered the betrayals and injustices of the 18th century, and demanded reparation.

1927 Indian Act Amendments = After the First World War, Indigenous veterans, such as François and William Pierrish became radicalized. In the face of Indigenous protests and resistance, the government tightened its control over First Nations' lives, with the Indian Act amendments of 1927. These made any Indigenous organizing illegal and tried to separate war veterans from their population by offering them citizenship, but only if they gave up their "Indian status". The goal of that policy, as expressed by the Indian superintendent Duncan Campbell Scott was to "get rid of the Indian problem. Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed". The 1927 amendments stayed in place until 1951 and represent "a shameful period in Canada's history" during which Indigenous reserves became internment camps, and repression against natives was the norm.

The 1950s and the birth of national organizations = The generation of Manuel's parents began to build national organizations, such as the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB), the forerunner of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), to take their fights to Canadians and the world. These resistance movements managed to enter a global international context of struggle for Indigenous peoples' rights all around the world.

The 2000s-2010s and the internationalization of the fight = The 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) or the Global Indigenous Caucus at the UN's Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNFPII) where the author was co-chair in 2012, showcase how the struggle of Indigenous peoples is ongoing and was taken to an international level. Manuel warns that the enlightenment of people concerning Indigenous issues doesn't exist yet, taking the example of the 2007 UNDRIP, which Canada fiercely opposed.

Consequences of the loss of land: the deep and long-standing impoverishment of Indigenous peoples.

Contrary to popular thinking, the theft of their lands continues to impact Indigenous every lives today. Manuel tells the story of the imprisonment of members of his family and people, highlighting that they were mistreated "simply for occupying [their] own lands".

Loss of land is also the cause of a deep and long-lasting impoverishment of Canadian First Nations. In B.C. Indigenous peoples account for only 0.36% of the territory, while settlers occupy 99.64%. If this inequality is already striking, others exist as well, contributing to the continuing pattern of land usurpation and impoverishment.

- **Unemployment rate** is 4 times higher for Indigenous peoples.
- Indigenous youth commit **suicide** at a rate 5 times higher.
- Indigenous children receive 1/3 of the **educational funding** compared to non-Indigenous kids.
- Indigenous peoples have a **7 year shorter lifespan** than non-Indigenous peoples.

"To you, I want to stress that this is not at all ancient history."

A legacy of struggle leading to a path forward in rebuilding strong Indigenous communities.

Indigenous struggles for sovereignty began as soon as settlers started to arrive in their territories to appropriate them without consent, and continue to this day. Indeed, Manuel points out that "as my father, Grand Chief George Manuel, often pointed out, the most important gift we have received from our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents is the **legacy of struggle.**" Manuel shares the necessity to honor those who came before his generation in the continuing fight to assert their rights and sovereignty, but also the need to discuss the tensions and conflicts of the movement in a respectful manner.

Manuel mentioned different ways to reconstruct healthy Indigenous communities:

- "**Building true Indigenous economies** that begin and end with our unique relationship to the land [...] **taking care of Mother Earth** is the most important contribution we can make." Indeed, as many people became conscious of the environmental crisis, Indigenous peoples can represent **important allies.**
- "**All Canadians have acquired the basic human rights to be here.**", meaning that by reclaiming control over Indigenous lands, they do not mean sending Canadians back to Europe.
- "We are certainly asking for **compensation for the illegal seizures**, but those amounts we can discuss."
- "The land retains its power and its beauty. **All we have to do is rethink our place on it.**"

"There is room on this land for all of us and there must also be, after centuries of struggle, room for justice for Indigenous peoples. That is all that we ask. And we will settle for nothing less."