

Listen to Us!: A Dialogue for Solidarity with Lawrence Sampson, American Indian Movement Spokesperson

Richard Kahn

Anthony J. Nocella II

The mantra of solidarity girds most of today's radical groups and revolutionary movements, with seemingly any issue easily replacing the infamous "workers" of Marx and Engels in an updated call of "'x' of the world unite!" But as any member of a militant cell, or even affinity group, well knows, solidarity as an ideal is much different and more easily achieved than the mutual trust and empowerment that is created through ongoing struggle together and the development of a shared history. Real solidarity, then, is a rare bird in a large forest and far from being simply another word for "network," "coalition," or "alliance," it extends through and beyond those meanings to connote loving friendship built upon honesty, respect, and self-sacrifice. Such solidarity as we speak of here is not a value to be upheld, but rather a principle that only emerges from our work together for a better world. It is not a law, or even a code, so much as an evolving language which we are always learning in common – a literacy containing information about our joint enemies and fears as well as our shared joys and dreams.

Too often animal activists, like all other activists, preach when they would do better to listen; they assign responsibility and fault rather than accept accountability and critique of their solutions; they burn bridges instead of animal laboratories and other social horrors. Animal rights activists and liberationists are doing a better job at in-group solidarity – the recent honoring of Rod Coronado and ALF at AR2003 was a benchmark for the movement – and while some such activists remain dogmatically single-issue oriented, most seem to recognize that solidarity with other struggles is not only worthy and right, but is in fact a political necessity. Still, one can spend countless hours searching AR newsletters, magazines, or websites in vain for a meaningful demonstration that animal activists understand, or worry about, how their movement integrates and relates to larger social justice concerns (beyond feminism) and planetary ecological crisis. Part of the reason for this dearth of information is that the movement itself is young and relatively small of numbers, on the one hand, while the average animal activist still tends to more likely be a white, middle-class female, on the other.

Without seeking to denigrate white, middle-class females (or anyone else – save perhaps vicious, bloodthirsty capitalists with a fetish for the animal abattoir), we believe that the demographics of the animal rights and liberation movements must become more diverse and representative of the full panoply of racial, class, cultural and gender differences that are available to inform any group with emancipatory and egalitarian social goals. AR and AL organizations need to become better educated about the broad-base of revolutionary history, and they need to look to begin dialogue and work with other oppressed groups such that they can mobilize greater political solidarity. It is through such dialogical practice, and

Anthony Nocella II is a co-founder of the [Institute for Revolutionary Peacemaking and Education](http://www.institute-for-revolutionary-peacemaking-and-education.org) and Center on Animal Liberation Affairs.. Syracuse University, PARC, 410 Maxwell, Syracuse, NY 13244. e-mail: ajnocell@maxwell.syr.edu
<http://student.maxwell.syr.edu/ajnocell/index.html>

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through involving ourselves deeply in one another's concerns and plights, that the great liberatory educator Paulo Freire thought that we might together overthrow the yoke of oppression and establish a new order of peace, freedom, and decency. Animal rights activists and liberators need to take up a Freirean approach alongside their other compatriots, companeros, and comrades involved in equal (but different) struggles, who, of course, must do the same! Divided, we are all conquered and we need to begin (all of us) to increase our understanding of one another such that together we are more than the sum of our parts. We can look to figures such as Subcommandante Insurgente Marcos, not as romantic figures of Guevarian warfare, but as a leader who understood profoundly the need to overcome by any means necessary the alienation his movement faced in the forests of Chiapas. Famously, Marcos signaled a united front for liberation and justice with the left resistance movement in the United States when he wrote a letter on April 24, 1999 to Mumia Abu-Jamal in order to congratulate him on his birthday. Later that same year, in October, Marcos wrote another letter to Leonard Peltier to reach out in solidarity towards the U.S. Native American community. Such behavior is typical of this successful revolutionary leader, as Marcos has strategically sought to build bridges with a variety of different socio-political movements throughout hundreds of countries. To this end, one can look to his numerous epistles and communiqués, which have been published in his books, archived on the web, read at protests, and collected in activist and academic texts translated into many languages. The lesson is very clear, then, as radical activists our job today is not merely single-issue reform, or widespread social contestation, it is also educational – we must do for ourselves what the oppressors by definition deny us, we must learn to love and die for one another. This is the pedagogy of the oppressed.

The following interview is the first of a series in which we engage with leading members of other struggles. The point here is not to offer up definitive answers, but rather to introduce fresh perspectives, to stimulate future questions, and to model how we may critically engage one another such that we move beyond reactionary psychology and politics. Again, solidarity is not merely words on a page – Q&A sessions are fine, but should only be regarded as one small means towards a much greater end. Still, when community is lacking and there is much to be achieved, even a few words between groups can be the start of real power between them. It is our great honor, then, to have had the opportunity to begin a dialogue with Lawrence Sampson, a spokesperson for the American Indian Movement (AIM), the North American warrior society for indigenous rights, ways, and values. At the age of five, Lawrence was the victim of the illegal Indian baby adoption programs the U.S. government secretly engaged in. After graduating college, he joined the U.S. army, where he was a paratrooper, and was involved in combat operations in Panama and Iraq. Besides working directly for the AIM in Texas, his home, Lawrence also represents AIM on the international level, where he recently co-organized the Indigenous World Forum in Ireland.

Anthony Nocella: Lawrence, I remember the first time we met at the University of Houston...you were speaking and I was tabling. I guess that was the beginning of our life-

long dialogue in search of truth. I also remember you had some hesitance in working with me because I was an animal rights activist. Why is it that the American Indian Movement is not supportive of the animal rights movement? I remember speaking to a well respected animal rights activist in the United States involved in protesting the Makah (a Native American nation that hunted whales), and him telling me that he “was not respected too highly by Ward Churchill (*the noted Native rights activist*).” I assumed why, but I didn’t want to go down that particular road that day with him. I also remember where we agreed, in effect, to have a true urban revolution - it was here that we began to speak about COINTELPRO, Che, and the Animal Liberation Front. But, today I want to know your thoughts on the animal rights movement. And how you can support the Animal Liberation Front, but not the animal rights movement?

Lawrence Sampson: I would like to think that the American Indian Movement is supportive of any comprehensive and moral effort that seeks to restore balance to society or to the Earth. However, what we have seen, is that those working for the liberation or benefit of what we commonly call animals, are, from our point of view, still coming from a perspective of human superiority. And as long as you assume your superiority, you will never understand your true place in the overall scheme of things. That is to say, some are still coming from a disconnected, "isn't it cute, we must be the saviors" sort of mentality. These are the same types of folks who happened on the scene in the early 20th century, such as John Collier and the "friends of the Indian", who pushed thru the Indian Reorganization Act, with well meaning, good intentions. The end result is, we are still fighting to throw off that yoke of foreign, oppressive, unaccountable governments, and all the avarices of colonization that their efforts brought with them. Sometimes, liberals are just as destructive as the "conservatives"-the mean spirited haters. See, we recognize that our fate, is the same as all that is natural -- the four legged, the winged, and the Earth. The same folks that wish to eradicate us, remove us, and silence our voice, are the same that would do the same to the other inhabitants of the Earth, and the Earth itself. From where we stand, it does not seem that animal rights activists, for the most part, *get it*. They are still coming from a disconnected, "we're at the top of the food chain" mentality. Just because you have recognized that animals should not be slaughtered and abused for profit does not mean you have the world all figured out. Instead of telling everyone what they should or should not be doing, why don't animal activists try to listen? Sit down and truly learn about the animals, learn about those who know more about them, that have lived and interacted with them. And yes, those that have hunted them and engaged in subsistence lifestyles, or at least descend from those that have. I hate to sound like some wisdom spouting Indian, but there is much knowledge gained from generations of being a part of an ecosystem-instead of sitting at the head of the table as the master of the universe. I don't think that most animal rights activists understand the knowledge, wisdom, and yes, love that an Indigenous person has of the animals he/she kills in order to survive. And that's the basis of our gulf of misunderstanding. Who better to understand the innate workings of the planet, than those who have had to have that love, in order to survive with balanced living? Who better than those who know what medicines certain animals, and for that matter, plants have within

them to help us survive in a balanced way, a way that does not endanger the next 7 generations? I think, and perhaps more assume, that many of those in the animal rights movement, would mirror the demographics of many movements, at least on the surface. I imagine that many of them are mere reactionaries, with little substance to support their views of what they are protesting. And if they are protesting, what are they offering as a solution? You can't just be against things, you have to offer solutions. I mean, you can't really be taken too seriously if you're protesting the use of animal hides in things like shoes and clothes, while wearing your petro-chemical based shoes and attire. Really now, just who do you think you're fooling? I hate to generalize, but we both know this element is well represented in your movement.

I would like to say, that in principle, I support the intention of interposing one's self in order to stop the suffering of animals. Direct action, of the sort that it begins to cost exploiters and inflictors of punishment for their malfeasance, is probably the only thing that will have an impact. It is our responsibility, all of us, as human beings, to defend those who cannot defend themselves. It seems all the corporate entities understand is the profit and loss statements. Their ethics, or rather, their lack of ethics, is guided by one principal, and that is profit. Again, the similarities here are striking; The only time we Indians have ever gotten anyone to listen or pay attention to our issues, is when we picked up a gun, or engaged in some other direct action that caused some seriously debilitating embarrassment, or cost somebody the kind of money we can only imagine or read about. It's a shame that we exist in such an environment, but we don't make the rules, do we? We make do with the hand we are dealt, and right now, the corporate monsters hold all the cards—the police, the courts, and the laws all favor the corporate criminal, and those of us that have to live with their carnage, their pollution, the suffering they inflict, are characterized as criminals, or more recently "terrorists", when we face up to them and tell them "it" has to stop. Further, the ethos of sacrifice is one of many values that are sorely lacking in the dominant society today. We, as Indian people, have always understood that you cannot have a balanced life without sacrifice—it is part and parcel of our cultures, and spirituality. It's good to see that some in the animal rights movement are willing to sacrifice for their beliefs. It goes to show that we have an agenda and underlying sense of responsibility that shares common ground. This is at least a partial explanation of why I can support those in the Animal Liberation Front in principle, while still decrying much of the animal rights movement, its participants, and tactics.

Richard Kahn: You briefly touch upon a defense of indigenous knowledge as having a special place in the scheme of the revolution -- I would be interested if you could spell out whether you thought either the AL or AR camps were making overtures in that direction and what possibilities for solidarity might exist. I take it that you see something like the New Age interest in indigenous peoples and shamanism, etc., as illegitimate and unhelpful? Are there any ways in which it might be helpful?

LS: First and foremost, the problem with what is commonly referred to as "NEW AGE" and those who practice it, specifically where it tries to inculcate native beliefs, is that its the same old song and dance, in regards to exploitation. People never seem to want to listen and learn, or when they do, it's so they can become an "instant Indian" and manipulate the teachings, almost always for profit. Really, what we're talking about, is our spirituality. And our spirituality is not a religion. They are lifeways-in other words, a way of living and learning. Non-Indians are generally not pre-disposed to this type of discipline. It's not a go to church on Sunday type of affair. It certainly isn't a for-profit exercise. I know I'm generalizing here, but this is what we are fighting so hard in our community to protect. It's the latest, last stand for our people, to defend our spiritualities. We generally have been willing to share, with some exceptions of course, but those who we have shared with have generally just exploited and twisted what they've seen and heard to fit their pre-disposed industrialized mindsets. Yes, our views towards the other living beings is part and parcel of what others would call our spirituality, therefore one has to at least have an understanding of this to comprehend our views on hunting and subsistence living. But we have to find that happy medium where folks can be exposed and taught without running back to some place in California claiming to be empowered by a medicine man as a Shaman, (a non-Indian word) and running for profit ceremony, or ceremony at all. It basically comes down to respect. It is good that this is getting discussed. In my mind, this issue is the core of our differences.

RK: Also, I had mentioned to Tony, how do you perceive the American Indian's role vis a vis this special place of indigenous wisdom considering the unprecedented physical/cultural/spiritual genocide upon the various tribes and peoples over the last centuries. Much of the scholarship has many tribes effectively displaced, hybridized, and to some extent alienated from their own indigenous wisdom after American attempts at integration/extermination -- many original languages lost, many culture practices degraded, American culture and language either evident or dominant within many communities, etc. To the degree that this is true, might not the American Indian Movement be more tolerable of other's contradictions -- such as the AR movement that is unsure how to replace the factory leather, etc? Perhaps the answer is to work together towards a better approach?

LW: Well, you certainly hit the nail on the head with that one. I want to stress that what is left of Indigenous land holdings, as well as traditions, ceremonies, and overall culture, has been fought and paid for with blood. And so if people will really consider that, maybe they'll understand why it's so important to protect today. The stories of genocide and ethnic cleansing are not words out of a history book, but our family histories. Up thru my generation and even today, our folks are either dealing directly with genocide, or it's fallout and trying to pick up the pieces. If folks can really understand this, they can understand why we are so adamant about protecting our traditions, of hunting, fishing, whaling, etc..Where these things have been lost, it is up to us to do whatever is necessary to bring them back, and that's a very complex thing to do. Because things are not done just for the sake of doing them, because they've always been done. There was reason and purpose in all of it. We believe we are maintaining balance not just for ourselves, but for all mankind and the Earth,

by retaining our ways. At times, we've even had to consult with non-Indians who may have documented things in books or in recordings, in order to bring them back. So, that's a classic example of working together to do what we know must be done. We still have a lot of work to do in our own communities, and a lot of healing to do. Over 500 years of genocide and all its effects do not go away overnight.

In regards to contradictions in the AR and ER Movements, that's a tough question. I mean, our difficulties are rooted in true lifeways and culture, whereas the AR and ER are coming from a moral, ethical, and/or socio-political platform. So, there's a difference there from the outset, as far as where we're coming from. My personal position is, I can be tolerable of anything, so long as it does not, under any circumstances, threaten Indian sovereignty and self determination. But of course, I don't speak for all Indians. And I don't suppose to have all the answers here. But we can definitely empathize with those trying to find their place in this world, especially those seeking a sustainable lifestyle. We definitely have to work together, which could take many different forms. I'd like to see tribal authorities begin a pan-Indian environmental enterprise, to reach out to your Movements, as one example.

AN: In our many discussions the dispute animal rightists have had with the Makah Indians has always been a sensitive issue with you. Do you think the animal rights movement turned their back on the Native American community?

LS: The Makah situation represents all that is wrong with the animal rights movement, from my point of view. Instead of engaging the Makah in dialogue, to understand why they whaled, what significance this practice had to their people, why they voluntarily stopped years ago, why they specifically chose the last few recent years to resume the practice, and why they felt the cultural importance of whaling sufficient enough to re-initiate the practice, Sea Shepherd and others chose to protest. And they didn't just protest. By putting up a phony and inflammatory website demeaning the Makah, and putting out bumper stickers that read "SAVE A WHALE, KILL A MAKAH", they lost the opportunity to learn, and they seriously damaged their own credibility, not to mention the support of Indians for a long, long time. The skyrocketing incidents of assaults on Makah and other Indians in the area was a direct result of the of animal rights activists. It became a racist confrontation, where the white folks, as always, knew better than the Indian. During the weeks of this scenario playing itself out, where the Makah took one whale for subsistence's sake, how many whales did the Japanese, Russian, and Norwegian ship factories kill for profit? 50? 100? Yet these "activists" chose to protest and endanger Indigenous people. Why? Because we are a more convenient, less threatening target? In the end, we see their campaign as one based on racism. The language of dialogue is always better than the rhetoric of confrontation. Your movement lost a vital opportunity here. Think of what of could have been gained.....

This must never happen again, for all of our sakes.

AN: If you were to be heard by the animal rights movement, what would your demands be from to them?

LS: To those who call themselves animal rights activists, I would say the following; LISTEN TO US!! We are the last remaining descendants of those who walked the Earth in balance. Who could you possibly learn more from than those who have an intimate knowledge of what you seek to protect and preserve? Anything else is to merely want to continue your relationship with nature as one of of ignorance, and ignorance will always lead to the very devastation of what you say you wish to protect. Sit down with us, and listen to our stories of where the Earth came from, how the animals came to look and live as they do, why things look and smell and act as they do. Understand the true reason things must be saved and protected. Listen to our stories, practices, and songs, and gain true knowledge. Know that your science does not offer all of the answers to the problems we all face. Listen to us, and we can all help each other. Perhaps we have not done enough to reach out to you. I can say it is most probably because our interaction with others has almost always been based on exploitation, but that we can still do more to reach out to you nonetheless. If we do, will you listen? Will you learn? Will you help to build the bridges that lead to understanding? An understanding not for superiority's sake, but for all those that live here, and the unborn generations yet to come? Try and understand not just the What and the How, but also the Why. What could be a better mission statement for this or any Movement? Respect our ways, and our sovereignty. What remains of them is the last true hope of preservation and conservation. If our voices refuse to be heard, if our ways and our cultures continue to fade, to suffer the same fate as those you would try and protect, then it is as Seattle said, "The end of living, and the beginning of survival".

RK: Finally, in your second mail to Tony, I think you made much clearer the reason why AL (as a liberation struggle that is willing to sacrifice) might be supportable over and against other AR (as liberal reform minded).... which is interesting b/c my experience of liberal reformists is that they hate AR people for being too left and militant, so what we are seeing here is that the general lot of AR appears caught in the political spectrum between the revolutionary left and the liberal left, unable to garner solidarity with either camp thus creating a major fracture and political unviability for the movement. Anyhow, my question to you centers around the antagonism to liberal reform. The age-old argument, of course, is that neither the militant nor the liberal change society but both in effect together, with the militant creating the necessary energy and the liberal providing the socially acceptable platform for change at the right historical moments. I could see why the American Indian Movement might itself question this but I would be interested as to your thoughts. In particular, as I am involved (very peripherally) with the Western Shoshone people in their fight against the government occupation of their land and its desecration as a nuclear graveyard. Corbin Harney is quite specific that he rejects the government's legal right to offer money for the land, but he defends his own right to the land both on the account of its traditional sacredness to the people but also on US legal grounds and the treaty of the 1860's

that delimited it to the Shoshone. What I am getting at is a question about the complexity of how revolutionary groups interpret their relationship to the Law of the oppressors. Are attempts to work within the law to be rejected outright as nonsensical, or are they to be used strategically wherever and whenever possible to grab larger spaces back for autonomy and future self-determination and social transformation? If the latter, which is what I take it that the radical Newe Sogobia strategy is -- also their use of white activists, new media, etc. -- then why is this an unacceptable tactic in the hands of animal rightists?

LS: This is an interesting question that I'm not sure how to answer. We in AIM have had to endure those within our own community that didn't like us "rocking the boat", and had faith in the American system of justice. Curious to say the least, coming from an Indian! But this is the case with all liberation struggles. The IRA have the same demographic to deal with in Irish society. We will never have 100% support, even in our own communities. Some folks just want to avoid struggle at all costs, no matter the cost.

As for what is at our disposal, yes we have to be inventive and flexible as to the tactics we use. Sometimes we will have to become part of a process so as to destroy it from the inside. You can't always stay separate from a system and point out its flaws. But that is a very complicated thing to do, and a decision to arrive at. It can also be very distasteful for those involved. I'm not sure there are any clear and concise answers here. As Indians, we have had to use American law and America's courts to stop the American government, but obviously, that method will not always work. We have to be willing to use a variety of methods to accomplish our goals. It's a delicate process - deciding what to do when. But we have to be willing to do whatever it takes, without limitations, to protect our sovereignty and self-determination.

Again, as Indians, our approach is complicated by the fact that we have our own cultural admonitions to deal with, that come into conflict with dealing with America. It is very difficult indeed to reconcile our own belief structure with resistance in some instances. It is a quandary all Indigenous people face. So, it's really a mixed bag for us, with cultural, spiritual, societal, and political concerns to reckon with, while facing the reality on the ground. And this is a problem we will face forever, I suppose.