Introduction: What place for indigenous people in modern States?

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Introduction

Indigenous people are usually defined as people with a distinctive culture whose ancestors occupied and used a certain territory before the arrival of newcomers, and who tend to be politically, economically and culturally marginalised by the latter. In short, indigeneity is the product of colonialism, whether external (colonisation by migrants coming from afar, usually from Europe) or internal (colonisation by neighbours and citizens of the same State). It is through their confrontation with people who advance claims to their ancestral land or resources and who threaten their culture and rights that the consciousness of being indigenous (at the same time different, more ancient and threatened) is developed.

Although contacts between widely different cultures are as old as long-distance trade, it was only after the *discovery* of the Americas by Columbus that a real scramble for land was initiated. Starting in the Americas and the Caribbean, it soon spread all over the world, including Oceania, Africa and Asia. By the end of the nineteenth century, most of the globe was under the control of a European power or one of its offshoots. However, the fate of the colonised populations differed greatly and one can roughly distinguish between regions that attracted large numbers of European settlers who soon outnumbered the original population (in Oceania and the Americas), from regions in which European colonisation never outbalanced (in demographic terms) the local populations (in Africa and Asia), partly due to the fact that here it was the European settlers who seemed to be more vulnerable to tropical diseases. In the first regions, descendants of European settlers gained their independence from the metropole, while in the second, those who overthrew colonial powers were African and Asian populations. As a result, the descendants of those who occupied land prior to European colonisation tend today to constitute a minority in the Americas and Oceania but they constitute the majority and are in power in Africa and Asia. While indigeneity is relatively easy to define in the first case, as the divide between descendants of primo-occupants and others continues to this day, it is more difficult in Africa and Asia. In Africa, almost any ethnic group claiming some form

of primo-occupancy can claim an indigenous (or autochthonous) status, as opposed to white settlers and Indian or Lebanese traders, for example. In Malaysia, the indigeneity of Malays and Dayak has been institutionalised to limit the political and economic position of Malaysians of Chinese or Indian descent. And yet, at another level, indigeneity is more strictly used to refer to populations that are believed to be even more ancient and that are today marginalised, such as nomadic pastoralist or hunting-gathering people (Baka, Batwa, San, Masai or Fulani in Africa or Penan in Borneo), or else small and isolated groups that are not part of the mainstream culture and global market, such as the *hill tribes* of South-East Asia or the *tribal people* of India.

If the criteria of primo-occupancy and of cultural distinctiveness do play an important role in defining indigeneity, the criterion of marginalisation, for its part, is absolutely central. Indigenous people have been colonised (and thereby displaced, dispossessed, acculturated, have lost control over their own development, and so on), and continue to suffer from it, or from its aftermath. It should be noted that colonisation took (and continues to take) different forms in different places. Some indigenous people have been eradicated by their low resistance to new epidemics, through genocide, or by sheer acculturation and integration into the mainstream society. Others try to survive in reserves. Yet others have succeeded in maintaining both a strong cultural difference and some control over their ancestral land and resources, as well as a certain degree of pride and self-esteem. Nevertheless, all suffer from being marginalised culturally, economically and politically.

Cultural marginalization

The colonization of indigenous people has usually gone together with sustained attacks on their culture. Missionaries have tried (and, to a large extent, succeeded) in converting them to Christianity. Indigenous people have had to learn the colonial languages in order to access education and the new administration, and many local languages have thereby disappeared. Customary laws have been subjected to a reinterpretation or control from the colonial system. Indigenous systems of norms and values have often given way to Western ones. Yet, despite all these aspects, indigenous people continue to struggle to maintain their cultural difference. Even in places where they have been acculturated, one often finds processes that try to 'reinvent traditions' (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983), which shows a will to cultivate difference, despite all the pressure to integrate into the dominant society.

The defence of cultural differences poses a challenge to nation states that try to construct a homogenous 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991). But it is also a challenge for indigenous movements that must both define themselves as different while still making room for their acculturated members. Moreover, indigenous movements are expected to build a cultural identity that is both defined in contradistinction to the national identity, and yet defined along similar lines, using the same criteria as those used to define national identities. One of the major difficulties in relation to claiming indigenous peoples' rights in Australia or Canada, for example, is that permissible difference and the claims which flow from this are defined as differences which are acceptable to the dominant tradition of *modernity* in Canada and Australia, a tradition which asserts that culture is something fixed and unchanging (in contrast to modernity itself, which is seen as fluid and changing despite being based on the apparently immovable opposition between being *modern* and being

traditional). In this context, indigenous people have to prove a fixed identity and a form of social practice that displays complexity and naivety in the ways required by the dominant society, if their claims to being indigenous and therefore to land are to be recognised.

In Canada, Asch (2001) describes how indigenous peoples have to demonstrate that they existed at 'a certain level of social organisation', to prove that they were at a 'tribal' not 'band' level of social organisation when colonialism happened. In Australia, Povinelli (2002) describes how indigenous peoples also have to display naivety by demonstrating that they have maintained their 'tradition' untainted by change if their claims to being indigenous, and therefore to land, are to be recognised. The case of the Mapuche in Argentina, described by Kradolfer in the present volume, offers another excellent example of the stakes and pitfalls that can accompany the negotiation of indigenous identities in modern States today.

Economy and livelihoods

Indigenous people have often been deprived of their customary resources, whether through the confiscation of their land, the destruction of the natural resources on which they relied, or the criminalisation of their livelihood strategies.

Firstly, their land has often been confiscated without compensation. The new colonial legal systems seldom recognise customary ownership, since the latter lacks any formal documentation, and since it often relates to land uses that are nomadic or semi-nomadic (pastoralism, hunting-gathering, shifting cultivation) that do not imply any permanent occupation of land, even though they involve very definite and internally recognized territories through which such people move. The new settlers and the new State that represents their interests thus often mistake grazing or hunting land for wasteland, and take the lack of any written document as a convenient opportunity to seize the land that customarily belongs to the indigenous population. In some cases, indigenous people have been resettled or protected in reserves, but these reserves are not always situated on ancestral land, and they too are under heavy colonising pressure from settlers. Even in countries that do their best to secure the land of their remaining indigenous people, such as in Brazil, the interplay between the national administration and indigenous people remains very complicated, as can be seen in the article by Grillini in the present volume.

Secondly, in many places the new settlers or the new state have destroyed the resources on which indigenous people rely. Famous examples are the extermination of the buffalo in North America, the large-scale exploitation of timber that destroys rainforest, the creation of dams that flood huge areas, or severe industrial pollution, such as the oil spills in the Niger Delta (a case that echoes the worries of Aboriginal communities in northern Canada regarding the construction of a new pipeline, as discussed by Luig in this volume).

Third, the traditional livelihood strategies of indigenous people have often been criminalised. Shifting cultivation and traditional hunting and gathering (including of protected species) has been seen as eco-vandalism and prohibited as part of an international strategy to protect biodiversity. Not only have indigenous people been dispossessed of large areas of land devoted to Western settlers, large-scale plantations or national parks, but they have also been prevented from using the resources on their remaining land as they wished. Under the pretence of bringing development, efficiency, rationalism and of protec-

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ting biodiversity, the new States have asked indigenous people to abandon their traditional livelihood strategies, adopt Western practices, and adapt to the globalised market.

All in all, many indigenous people have been dispossessed of their customary resources and forced to change their livelihood strategies to adapt to the new situation.

Politics

By being integrated into (post-)colonial States, indigenous people have lost much control over their collective destiny. Self-determination is the core of all their claims. Indigenous people want to be able to control their culture and identity definition, their livelihood and resources, and therefore also the political processes that determine these aspects. They are not against change or development, but want to be able to choose and control their own development. Whenever States take decisions that influence them, they want to be heard and take part in the decision-making process. This claim is a tremendous challenge to States that encourage the creation of a homogenous national identity. Decentralising power to political entities that are ethnically based inevitably creates a differential treatment among fellow citizens who are otherwise supposed to have equal constitutional rights. Indigenous people, by claiming cultural, legal and political pluralism, are therefore challenging the supposed national homogeneity among citizens, and challenging the national legal approach of States.

All the papers presented in this volume deal with the political aspects of indigenous claims, both between indigenous movements and States (Luig, Grillini, Kradolfer), within indigenous movements themselves (Steur and Kradolfer), and in terms of the political implications for anthropology itself (Kenrick). Steur discusses the different (and sometimes conflicting) political discourses and strategies held by Adivasi movements in Kerala, showing how they develop not only in terms of their local needs, but also in reaction to the failure of other forms of political movements. Similarly, Kradolfer shows how the Mapuche movements develop both on the basis of specific realities and needs, but also in reaction to the internationalization of indigenous movements and to their representation within the system of the United Nations. Luig focuses on the conflicts accompanying a pipeline project in northern Canada and analyses the power struggles that ensue, and that tend to reproduce the political marginalization of indigenous communities. Finally Grillini dissects the contradictions that derive from any attempt to formalise informal ownership of indigenous land, and to build bridges between widely different cultures and legal systems. Finally, Kenrick re-examines the writing of two key British anthropologists – Adam Kuper and Tim Ingold – by contextualising them within the political struggles of indigenous peoples.

One also finds, in all the papers, profound reflections on the difficulties that these problems pose for anthropologists. Should they be advocating for indigenous rights in all instances, should they be trying to reach a neutral, objective and technical point of view, or is the latter inevitably a perspective of modernity and therefore is it, far from being neutral, rather a view from nowhere that creates modernity's road to nowhere? Should they just try to describe a situation without getting involved, or do they have a moral obligation (deriving perhaps from their specialisation in indigenous affairs, or perhaps from other more universal values) to take position and action? Should they deconstruct local discourses and political strategies, should they side with them to reinforce them, or should they (also?) deconstruct the discourses of modernity and the political strategies they engender?

The world in which we live can hardly be described as *post-colonial*, since most former colonies have simply inherited and reproduced the architecture of the colonial States, perhaps partly because those which have tried to do otherwise have paid a severe penalty for attempting to do so. Most States are today built according to a nationalist ideology that originates in 18th century Europe. In fact, the opposition so often made between the State as the anchor of modernity and the nation as the anchor of tradition perhaps hides the way in which the modern *State* is entirely dependent on a particular oppositional experience of identity, a sleight of hand in which *moderns* insist nationality, ethnicity and a host of what they perceive to be 'traditional' forms of identity do not define them, while relying on state policies which discriminate, exclude and include entirely on the basis of such supposedly mutually exclusive (*national* reframed as *state*) identities.

It is in Latin America that the resistance to such State processes is the strongest, something that tends to destabilise State responses since, unlike most other social movements, the fight of indigenous people does not aim at gaining State power but rather at claiming autonomy and the right to live differently (Holloway 2002: 156–7). Thus, indigenous resistance does not fit into any pre-conceived categories of how society and power should be organised (Holloway & Peláez 1998), and it defends instead pluralism and diversity. The fact that most States make little room for indigenous people, multiculturalism, or legal pluralism – except in terms which reinforce the idea that such people are lost in the past or tradition – allows us to safely predict not only that indigenous people have not finished questioning the way nation-states are built and operate but also that many others will continue to do likewise. Along similar lines, they will continue posing fundamental questions about the object and role of anthropology (an enterprise which is both a product of colonialism's powerful reach and of people's never-ending astonishment that there are other ways of organising society and experiencing identity than their own).

From one perspective, finding acceptable solutions to the problems indigenous people pose to the state constitutes an exciting challenge for generations of politicians to come. From another perspective, finding acceptable solutions to the problems the State poses to indigenous peoples constitutes a powerful challenge to many anthropologists. However one views the challenge, it is proof (if one is still needed) that, far from being remnants of the past, indigenous people's struggles and experience provide us with important perspectives on what will shape our societies in the 21st century.

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