

Globalization, Indigenism, and the Politics of Place

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I take up below some questions raised by the term “indigenous.” If we seem to spend more time speaking about words these days than about the world to which the words refer, there is good reason for it. A period of radical change, especially radical change in conceptions and practices of politics, generates transformations in the meaning of the terms with which we seek to comprehend those changes; transformations that arise not only from the changes themselves but also, and more importantly, from the appropriation of concepts for competing political projects, and the discursive conflicts to which they give rise. The war the United States has launched in Iraq may be unprecedented for the attention its perpetrators have devoted to questions of vocabulary, which in turn is tied in with their concerns about possible legal and propaganda repercussions of the choice of vocabulary in describing the war and its consequences. Even imperialism, it seems, needs in our day to be mindful of consequences. This war may point to the future in this regard, as it does in so many others, as it may be the most dramatic (because legally dubious) instance to date of the subjection of political to legal issues, which itself disguises the manipulation of international law in the name of national interest, if not the interests of an unusually unscrupulous fraction of a corporate and fanatical religious cabal that has usurped the national interest. These are times, to recall the *Analects* of Confucius, that call for *zhengming*, the “rectification of names,” if we keep in mind that what is at issue is not the truth of names, as Confucius would have it, but some measure of clarity in our political and cultural discourses.

Indigenous, like globalization, with which it has been paired in the present project, may be understood in a variety of ways with different political consequences. I am most interested here in the gap between the sense of indigenous that informs this volume, something relativis-

tic, along the lines of “the local”—as in “the global and the local”—and another, more grounded, sense of indigenous, that derives its meaning not from its contrast with the global, but from substantial autonomous claims to a content that foregrounds an almost absolute attachment to place understood concretely. While grounded in place, this latter sense of indigenous nevertheless challenges the global with its own holistic claims. I suggest below that such an understanding of “indigenous,” which has acquired visibility in tandem with “globalization,” offers more radical possibilities for political critique than is allowed for in those critiques that take as their premise the nation or the “third world,” which perpetuates a culturalist power politics without questioning the foundations of unequal power.

The original title suggested for this project, “globalization and indigenous cultures,” suggested most importantly a concern for issues of cultural homogenization and heterogenization under conditions of globality in the world political economy, with particular reference to the People’s Republic of China (hereafter, PRC).¹ But the critical goals of the project go deeper. This is evident in the response to my query on the meaning of the indigenous by Shaobo Xie, which is worth quoting at some length here because of its relevance to the issues involved in both its clarifications and its ambiguities:

By “indigenous,” we mean “native” or “having originated in and being produced, growing, living, or occurring naturally in a particular region or environment” (*Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* 592). Actually it could be taken as equivalent to what is designated by the Chinese word “*bentu*.” When we say “indigenous cultures,” we mean *bentu wenhua* of previous colonized or semi-colonized countries or of “third world” countries as distinguished from postmodern Western cultures. More specifically, the term both refers to cultural values, productions, traditions, and heritages in those countries which stand distinct from postmodern Western cultures and refers to cultural traditions and heritages of those countries which have more or less remained unaffected by Western cultures. We used

the term pretty much in the same sense as it is in the following context: “The opening up of hitherto protected economies cannot be explained by simply pointing to Western capital alone, however, for this ignores the role played by indigenous capitalist classes. . . . But the loudest calls for liberalization were coming not from the IMF but from within, from the considerably powerful indigenous industrial bourgeoisie. The strength of indigenous Indian capital needs to be seen in terms of its increasingly hegemonic sub-imperialist role not only in the sub-continent, but elsewhere around the globe”.²

I would like to elaborate on this statement. Indigenous here serves two critical goals. In its deployment with reference to culture (“indigenous cultures”), it is intended to underline the persistence in modernity and postmodernity of cultural legacies that have survived the “Western” cultural onslaught. We may deduce from the persistence of these cultural legacies that modernity itself is appropriated into different national cultural contexts to produce alternative modernities of one sort or another; modernity itself, in other words, is “indigenized.”

This latter reading of Xie’s statement is justified by the second sense of indigenous in the statement, which is directed in this case not against the homogenizing claims of a “Western” modernity, but the complicity of native elites (not just the capitalist class but also, as in the case of the PRC, the “socialist” bureaucratic elite) in the globalization of capitalism, something overlooked in many discussions of globalization. Rather than in opposition to the homogenizing forces of globalization, “indigenous” appears here as a function of globality, in its “sub-imperialist” service to the ever deeper penetration of the local by the forces of the global, which in the end deprives “indigenous” of any substantial meaning, as the indigenous appears here as a creation and an extension of the global.

These two senses of indigenous may be perceived as different aspects of the contradictions created in the confrontation between the global and the local, or between capitalist modernit(ies) emanating from the “West,” and native cultural legacies. In either of the two senses, moreover, it is the nation (implicit in “the country”) that serves as the referent

for “indigenous,” which needs to be interrogated further. The identification of indigenous with the national elides questions that are raised by the two contradictory senses of “indigenous.” Most important is the problematizing of the nation itself as native capitalist classes come to play a “hegemonic sub-imperialist role,” and, as a global fifth column, sort of to speak, undermine the integrity of the nation economically, politically, and culturally. Needless to say, this does not rule out the possibility that the very same elite may claim premodern native cultural legacies as sources of its identity on the global scene, or against radical challenges to its rule at home.

The appropriation of indigenous for the national further erases the sense of indigenous as grounded in place, which is also implicit in the Chinese term, “*bentu*,” that needs to be distinguished from the national.³ The indigenization of modernity in the nation has attracted much attention in recent years. The argument is important in challenging the paradigmatic claims of modernity as it has unfolded in Europe and North America, and bringing into the discussion of modernity a sense of its historicity from its very origins, which themselves become increasingly difficult to identify in their entanglements in what was conventionally relegated earlier to the “premodern”—itself a product of modernity.⁴ Moreover, cultural, intellectual, philosophical, and religious traditions that transcend the local, and provide “third world” nations with their ideological identities, are important in challenging and providing alternatives to parochial Euro-American traditions that, empowered by the threat of imminent violence, masquerade as exclusive sources of universal truth. Suppressed or marginalized for much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries under both the capitalist and the socialist regimes of modernity, these traditions have re-emerged, ironically, with “globalization,” and promise to enrich our ways of knowing the world—which, in a significant sense, is what the postmodern is all about if it is understood in its global repercussions and implications culturally and ideologically.

The indigenization of modernity in the nation, however, is not such a novel idea, even in socialist states that sought to carry assumptions of bureaucratic rationality to their unfortunate logical conclusions. This

is especially evident in the case of the Chinese revolution, as it was expressed in Maoism, with its insistence on “making Marxism Chinese” (*Makesi zhuyide Zhongguohua*). Perhaps because of its insistence on a vernacular socialism (which was the content of the revolution’s modernity), the Chinese revolution in its Maoist version was particularly sensitive to difference within a common universality, and displayed a marked aversion to rationality of the bureaucratic variety. On the other hand, while Chinese socialism as a product of guerilla struggle was unusually sensitive to issues of place, nation-building was a fundamental goal of the revolution, and the nation served as the predominant reference for its conception of modernity.⁵

The contemporary situation—in China and elsewhere—is postnational in a number of senses. If the Communist revolution in China achieved one thing, it was success in nation-building. No one would dispute presently the integrity of China as a nation, its political integrity and, increasingly, economic power. Nevertheless, the meaning of being Chinese politically or culturally may be more questionable than ever before. Within the PRC, there is a resurgence of local consciousness, but in a different sense of the local than earlier: the local is still juxtaposed to the national, but it is increasingly a product not just of localized parochialism, a retreat from the national, but of interactions between the global and the local that cut across the boundaries of the nation, projecting the local into transnational spaces. The existence of a multiplicity of Chinese or Chinese-dominated societies in East and Southeast Asia not only complicates the relationship between Chinese ethnicity and political organization, but also contributes to the transnationalization of the populations in individual societies. Finally, the so-called Chinese diaspora produces a multiplicity of Chinese cultures, that are the products of the “indigenization” of ethnic Chinese populations in diverse places, with their own political and cultural characteristics. The question thrown up by these phenomena is a fundamental one. What is at issue is not just the indigenization of global forces within a Chinese national space, as that space needs to be understood in the plural. Ethnic Chinese are themselves indigenized into different localities, fragmenting notions of Chineseness, and raising serious ques-

tions about what we might mean when we speak of the indigenization of the global into local spaces understood in terms of the nation, or that presuppose some kind of identity between the national, the ethnic and the cultural.⁶ These problems suggest the need for a different appreciation of the indigenous where modernity is concerned. Challenges to Euro-American hegemony in modernity need to be grasped critically, in their own ideological reification of postcolonial state and class formations in these societies, if they are not to serve the cause of reactionary nationalism disguised as anti-imperialism. It is arguable that the nation is still indispensable as a defense against neocolonial forces of globalization, but only if we are mindful that the national project is itself a colonial force that erases the local and the place-based in the name of its own universalistic claims—both in terms of the “universality” of the nation-form, and in terms of claims over the “national” territory, which are not merely legal but also cultural. This is where indigenous, as in “indigenous peoples,” appears in its full critical significance against the colonialism not only of the global but also of the national. Indigenous people, the people of the “Fourth World,” have become quite visible in world politics since the 1970s. Anti-colonial struggles after World War II, but especially from the 1960s, also empowered indigenous people, and brought them together across national boundaries, culminating in 1975 in the founding of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. The United Nations, and other international organizations such as the ILO (International Labor Organization), provided a novel political space for indigenous self-assertion. Indigenous lobbying led in 1982 to the creation of the Working Group on Indigenous Peoples, which over the last two decades has served as the advocacy group for the voicing of indigenous grievances, communication among indigenous peoples, and legislation intended to protect indigenous political and cultural rights. Indigenous concerns have been very important in the formulation of legislation on so-called Cultural Property Rights, to protect the integrity of native cultures against the commodifying forces of global capitalism and national economic exploitation (as in the exploitation of indigenous cultural practices and forms in tourism). While nation-states have had much reason to be unhappy about indigenous self-assertion,

United Nations activity has spurred action at the national level for the protection of indigenous peoples and cultures. The estimated 300,000 indigenous people around the world have indeed become quite visible, and serve as the source of a new kind of social mobilization in the name of economic, political, and cultural survival and justice. The issue of indigenous rights is ultimately an issue of human rights, with profound implications for everyone.

In predominantly Chinese societies, the most dramatic changes have been those in Taiwan. Since the 1980s, indigenous peoples in Taiwan have found a new voice, asserting their presence both at home and in international fora. The newly accepted term for indigenous people, *yuanzhu min* (literally, “original inhabitants”) resonates with such terms as “First Nations” in Canada, and indicates the importance of the international context in empowering indigenism. It is not a coincidence that the assertion of indigenous rights in Taiwan has coincided with an emergent Taiwan-consciousness since the 1980s, in response to threats from the PRC, and in repudiation of earlier Guomindang identification with the Mainland; it is, in other words, part of a broader indigenization of political consciousness, and an intensified identification with place, that has made possible indigenous/non-indigenous cooperation in common political projects.⁷

Indigenous views on economic development, political sovereignty, and culture transcend indigenous peoples themselves in their consequences. The very fact of indigenous self-assertion has called into question distinctions of civilized and uncivilized, progressive and backward, and developed versus underdeveloped that have informed modern ideas of progress and development. Indigenous people have added a whole new dimension to the understanding of colonialism by pointing to their colonization at the hands not only of the First but also of the Second and Third Worlds, themselves victimized in different ways by colonialism. The continued colonization of indigenous peoples raises questions about assertions concerning the end of colonialism. It also underlines the fundamental character of the nation-state as a colonizing force, enforcing cultural homogeneity and assimilation even where they do not exist. The indigenous idea of community directly challenges the claims

of the nation as “community,” while the indigenous search for a political space that exists above the nation presupposes a higher legal authority than the nation-state. In either case, sovereignty is shifted from the nation-state to the local community, or the supra-national organizational and legal context of the nation-state.⁸

Most important may be the indigenous cultural challenge. Indigenous societies by definition display a great variety of cultural practices. But underlying such differences are certain common assumptions, by no means restricted to indigenous peoples, that reaffirm the intimate and organic connectedness of culture, social existence, and the natural environment. These assumptions inevitably call into question our ways of knowing, and demand a knowledge that serves the purposes not of capital or the state but of human survival and justice. Since “culture, knowing, and living are intricately interrelated,” there is no distinction in these convictions between knowledge and ethics. Such a knowledge, grounded in “the ecology of place,” needs also to be mindful of the interconnectedness of all phenomena.⁹

The coherence and consistency of indigenous views of society, nature, and knowledge is easily exaggerated. Indigenous itself is a term that is open to a wide range of interpretation. While there may be some plausibility to claims of “native” belonging in the settler societies of the Americas, Australia, or Taiwan, indigeneity is quite controversial in the case of societies with longer histories. Andrew Gray writes that “‘indigenous’ is as much a concept of political action as it is of semantic reflection.” He elaborates:

. . . the clinching concept in the definition of *indigenous* is “Self-determination.” This open-ended umbrella term covers self-identification, political and resource control, and free cultural expression. From this we see that indigeness is a quality or aspect of the identity of peoples who have lived in an area prior to conquest or colonization and who are not empowered to live according to their socio-cultural, economic, and political life-styles. The indigenous movement is an assertion of this identity.¹⁰

Indigenous people, moreover, have suffered centuries of colonization, as well as political and cultural transformation, that have created new kinds of divisions in societies so described. While it may speak in the language of primordialism, indigenism is very much a product of the present both in its adjustments to new forms of knowledge, and in discursive conflicts over the meaning and strategy of indigenism among the indigenous peoples themselves. It is also open to manipulation at the hands of indigenous elites who utilize the ideology of indigenism to promote interests that are not necessarily shared by the communities they claim to represent.¹¹

These problems serve as excuses for discrediting indigenism by states and ideologues of modernity, capitalist or socialist, who object to the radical implications of indigenous ideology, which makes as much sense as repudiating democracy because it serves the United States government as a cover for imperial ambitions. Neither should indigenism be dismissed as one more consumerist fad because of New Age appropriations of its ideas and practices. Care must be taken to recognize the special problems of indigenous societies, and not to appropriate indigenous concerns for problems of contemporary society in general. But indigenism does speak to issues that are of general concern; which accounts at least in part for the empowerment of the indigenous voice in world politics in recent years. The welfare of indigenous societies may well be a litmus test in determining the well-being of societies worldwide.

I would like to comment briefly by way of conclusion on differences between the two senses of indigenous I have focused on here. Indigenization as the localization of global forces is readily accepted even by states and corporations because it reaffirms the prerogatives of the nation, especially when it comes to questions of culture. Indigenism in the second sense provokes a great deal more opposition, if not disdain, because it rejects the language of power that infuses both global relations, and our ways of knowing the world. While indigenous philosophies have been relegated to backwardness by modern assumptions about progress, perhaps even more adamantly under socialist than under capitalist states, what is at issue I think entails more than progressiveness or backwardness. Retrograde religious revivals find advocates at all levels

of society, while indigenous claims are as a rule greeted with impatient irritability. What is ultimately at issue in all instances is power; more precisely, the repudiation in political and cultural indigenism of existing norms and organization of politics and knowledge. Indigenism demands a new language of politics and knowledge, which is what makes it radical in implication even if indigenous peoples are not always able to live up to their own cultural and philosophical self-images. Indeed, while indigenism speaks in the language of the past, the language is informed more by vision than by empirical evidence that the vision had been realized anytime in the past. Indigenism, in other words, has a strong utopian strain.

Fundamental to any claim to indigenous identity is an assertion of an inalienable connection between community and land, and, by extension, between society and nature. While this is often expressed in a language of spirituality that is so dear to New Age devotees, what is important to it in my view is its refusal to draw any clear distinction between the spiritual and the material, so that it would be equally legitimate to describe indigenous spirituality as being grounded quite materially. This is quite visible in indigenous claims, for example, which hold that separation from land would result not just in the physical but also in the cultural extinction of the community; an appeal that ironically seems to carry more weight legally than the actual physical extinction of communities. Refusal to draw a distinction between the material and the spiritual distinguishes indigenous claims from the spiritualities of organized religion, accustomed as the latter is to “realistic” distinctions between secular and spiritual power, that goes against the formal and legal demands of modern secularism. It is, on the other hand, quite resonant with mystical strains in all religions, and reminiscent in its assumptions—in the present context—of the philosophical principles of Daoism. An ecological social sensibility may be the best way to describe it in secular terms.

Given this sensibility, indigenism is critical of development projects that ignore immediate social needs as well as long-term natural consequences of development. Indeed, since indigenous peoples have consistently been victims of development, it is not surprising that they should

question the developmentalism of the societies that have victimized them in the name of economic and political progress. But we may also recognize that having been victimized or bypassed by development projects is also an important element in fostering indigenous objections to development, when others deriving at least some benefit from development have been resigned to, if not actively forgetful of, the price it exacts in social and ecological alienation. It is here that the indigenous movement has served as the conscience of an ecological approach to nature and society that has been erased by the fetishism of development, globalized by the globalization of capitalism, but a globalization which a socialism under the sway of capitalism did much to promote against its own ideological compulsions.¹²

Finally, in the political realm, the indigenous claim of ties to the land cuts into the metonymic relationship the nation-state presupposes between land and national territory. Land in the indigenous conception is not only intimately connected with the people who work it and draw their sustenance from it, but derives its meaning from that relationship, which is as much a spiritual as a material relationship. The claim is one that has created much legal headache for nation-states, but also has exposed the fundamentally colonialist character of the nation. It is, in fact, an assertion of place-based sovereignty not only against an off-ground globalization, but also against the abstractions of the nation-state. This does not necessarily call for the abolition of the nation-state, as became quite clear during the Zapatista Uprising in Chiapas. Rather, accepting the nation-state as one more level in a multi-leveled regulatory system, place consciousness points to the need to restore democracy to the functioning of states that have become ensnared ever more powerfully in the corporate organization and plunder of the earth's resources, in which, under the new regime of postmodern globality, there are no longer any clear distinctions between elites of the first, the second, and the third worlds. For all its faults, the Fourth World remains as a reminder of possible alternatives to the existing state of things.¹³

I have no intention here of engaging in romanticization of this "Fourth World." The utopian ideals asserted in indigenism are important, on the one hand, to the social and cultural survival of indigenous peoples, but

also speak, on the other hand, to problems created by unbridled developmentalism, as expressed in slogans of globalization. Indigenizing global trends in national spaces is one answer to the homogenizing forces of globality, but it stops at the level of national welfare and cultural identity, without addressing root problems created by developmentalism, in which elites globally are complicit.

On the other hand, it is necessary to recognize that indigenism itself is a modern, if not a postmodern, phenomenon. The integrity of the indigenous vision itself may be more imagined than real, when indigenous societies, in their interactions with the world “outside,” are subject to social divisions of class, gender, and racial/ethnic diversity, among other differences, that reveal claims to harmony to be questionable, and demand confrontation of the difficulties they present if harmony is to be more than an ideological cover for new forms of power. Place-consciousness itself can serve as a cover for parochialism, and serve as an excuse for setting one place-based interest against another, unless groundedness in place is mindful of the holism of nature and society, understood not just as an ether of harmony, sort of to speak, but as a structured totality with contradictions built into its very structurations. We need to think in terms not just of places and holisms but also of translocal or transplace interactions that mediate the relationships between places and imperial centers, national or global.

Indigenism in this radical sense may serve as the source of much-needed utopias, but only if it is open to transformations from utopian perspectives outside of itself. It may turn otherwise into one more element to be consumed in contemporary reconfigurations of global power, and a source of conservatism rather than a radical challenge to the *status quo*.

Notes

- 1 While the PRC is regularly referred to as “China” in both academic and popular literature, the argument here demands greater concreteness and specificity in the use of “China”; hence my insistence on the PRC in referring to Mainland China which, I argue below, needs to be concretized even further.
- 2 Shaobo Xie, e-mail to the author, 22 Nov. 2002; Rao, 165–184.

- 3 *Bentu*, literally, “rooted in the land,” definitely has the connotation of “place-based,” and is related to the national only metonymically (and, I might add, ideologically). The familiar “*punti*” (*bendi*, rooted-in-place, hence locals) vs. “*hakka*” (*kejia*, guests, for newcomers or later arrivals) distinction of Southern China, which has had the effect of ethnic differentiation of people of joint Han stock, is an extreme example of the importance of place built into the term *bentu* etymologically. The distinctions at issue here are similar to distinctions involving such terms as “native” and “nation.”
- 4 I have discussed this question of the historicity of modernity at greater length in “Modernity as History: Post-revolutionary China, Globalization and the Question of Modernity.”
- 5 For further discussion, see Dirlik, “Mao Zedong and ‘Chinese Marxism.’”
- 6 For further discussion, see “Bringing History Back In: Of Diasporas, Hybridities, Places and Histories” in Dirlik, *Postmodernity’s Histories: The Past as Legacy and Project*, 173–202 and Wang Gungwu, “Chineseness: The Dilemmas of Place and Practice.”
- 7 Alliance of Taiwan Aborigines. See also Chiu, “From the Politics of Identity to an Alternative Cultural Politics: On Taiwan’s Primordial Inhabitants’ A-systemic Movement” and Chiu, “Nationalist Anthropology in Taiwan, 1945–1996—a reflexive survey.” An important instance of indigenous/non-indigenous cooperation in defense of place has been the Meinong anti-Dam protests (Meinong Aixiang xiejinhui [The Meinong Aixiang Progress Association]). For official responses, see the essays in the special issue of *Free China Review* 42.6 (June 1992).
- 8 For a discussion of these issues, see Wilmer, especially chapter 2.
- 9 See Kawagley 126, 133. For an important collection of documents on indigenous world views within the context of political and cultural struggles, see Moody.
- 10 Gray 35–58, 41, 40.
- 11 For a discussion of exploitative relations within indigenous societies, with reference to the Maori, see Rata. I am grateful to Dr. Rata for sharing this paper with me. For an advocacy of bringing together science and native knowledge, see Kawagley. The proper approach to such synthesis was the subject of a recent conference, “Turning Science to the Service of Native Communities,” University of Alaska-Fairbanks, 13–15 July 2003.
- 12 One of the important texts to come out of the radical ferment of the 1960s in the United States, overlooked even by radicals, was *Marxism and Native Americans*, edited by Ward Churchill, that pointed to the commonalities between Marxism and capitalism when it came to questions of development. For a commentary on this aspect of Marxism, within the context of globalization, see Dirlik, *After the Revolution: Waking to Global Capitalism*. There is also an unmistakable resonance in these critiques between indigenism and anarchism.

- 13 For a discussion of issue of place in connection with politics and culture, see Prazniak. For the relevance of indigenous ideas of organization to contemporary politics, see Childs, et al.

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