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The Origins of Indigenism: Human Rights and the Politics of Identity

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The Origins of Indigenism: Human Rights and the Politics of Identity. Ronald Niezen. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. xix + 272 pp., notes, references, index. \$49.95 (cloth), \$18.95 (paper). ISBN 0-520-23554-1, 0-520-23556-8. [www.ucpress.edu]

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Ronald Niezen defines *indigenism* as “a social movement with a strategic focus outside of states that seeks to activate rights to autonomy *within* states” (p. 136). Apparently uninterested in indigenism’s national manifestations, the author claims as his object of study “the world,” but contained in the nutshell of the Palais des Nations in Geneva (p. 1). He is so impressed with the actors and their actions at the international arena of indigenous politics at the United Nations that he contradictorily evokes Benedict Anderson’s catchy concept of imagined communities (created to highlight the emergence of nation-states) to imply more than can possibly be implied in the context of the periodic and mostly episodic meetings very far away from home. The attempted application of Anderson’s concept in the Geneva context could not be farther from its original context.

Throughout the book we find references to disagreements, bickering, and other forms of dissonance among the indigenous and nonindigenous participants in the United Nations meetings, but by and large one has the sense that there is an underlying harmony resulting from a common cause. Nevertheless, that context is far from being a Turnerian manifestation of *communitas* where all indigenous participants are in a blessed state of liminality. There are significant differences between the representatives of the various countries, if for no other reason than the fact that each one has experienced what Ashis Nandy has identified as the “intimate enemy” (in a book of the same name, 1983). For all the commonality of suffering that unites the indigenous participants, they have coexisted for a long time with distinct nation-states and have, necessarily, internalized much of their national ethos. No wonder a Brazilian delegate once complained of her discomfort with the overassertiveness of Native Americans from the United States, who tend to dominate the discussions at the Palais des Nations.

Without claiming originality (as his bibliography indicates), Niezen’s somewhat repetitive text offers the reader the welcome testimony of a North American (in its geographical rather than geopolitical sense) anthropologist committed to and long involved with the cause of indigenous peoples, and who sees the United Nations supranational forum as a hopeful instrument to curb state abuses. Nevertheless, the author seems to oscillate between two opposing misapprehensions: on the one hand, that universalism as the underlying logic of the United Nations will bring to indigenous peoples (via their active

leaders) irreversible changes and a measure of inauthenticity; on the other, that relativism, as an implicit closure of dominated cultures, will contribute to state domination.

I see these concerns as misapprehensions because neither universalism nor relativism exists in absolute terms or represents a major force against indigenous rights. While exposure to the technical, intellectual, and social apparatus of the human rights circuit affects indigenous leaders directly involved with it, back home their respective indigenous communities are unlikely to be influenced in the same way. In any case, change is something to which all peoples in the world are fully accustomed. Moreover, it is the humanist strength of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that has allowed, paradoxically, indigenous peoples to seek strategic supranational support for sanctions against abusive state measures. Regardless, it is the insistence on relativism that provides indigenous peoples with the assurance that their ways of life will not be judged by external parameters. As Todorov has proposed in *Nous et les autres: la réflexion française sur la diversité humaine* (1983), ideologically laden notions such as universalism and relativism should be taken not as fixed categories, but rather as strategic devices for specific courses of action. The best evidence that such strategy works are the successful outcomes accomplished by indigenous peoples at the United Nations, such as those mentioned in Niezen's book (p. 186).

In other words, *The Origins of Indigenism* owes its readers a deeper and more refined analysis of the contrasting worldviews that inform both the universal presuppositions inherent in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the logic of each distinct indigenous people whose sociocultural integrity is put under the umbrella of the United Nations. The stereotyped characterizations in this book of thinkers such as Boas, Lévy-Bruhl, and Morgan (p. 101), besides revealing a poor reading of these classics of anthropology, fail to advance the quest for a lucid appraisal and understanding of an issue as complex as international indigenism.

A fine point in Niezen's assessment of the generalized adoption of the term "indigenous peoples" is his distinction between "ethnonationalism" and "indigenism," between peoples who have emerged from recently decolonized countries and peoples who suffered the often genocidal consequences of the colonial powers in the Americas and Oceania. A key feature that distinguishes the two modes of nonconformism is a quest of secession, for while ethnonationalists fight to gain independence from oppressive states, indigenous peoples struggle to regain what they have lost rather than to gain what they have never had and probably do not want, i.e., statehood.

Despite the author's assertion that he wants to study "the world," he is at his best when he brings up the poignant cases of the Canadian Crees and the African Tuareg. There is, after all, something to be said for the anthropologist's ability to engage in intimate relationships with cultures not his own.