

Book Review

SOWA, Frank, 2014 *Indigene Völker in der Weltgesellschaft: Die kulturelle Identität der grönländischen Inuit im Spannungsfeld von Kultur und Natur*, Bielefeld, transcript Verlag, 435 pages

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In his book *Indigene Völker in der Weltgesellschaft: Die kulturelle Identität der grönländischen Inuit im Spannungsfeld von Kultur und Natur* ("Indigenous peoples in the world polity: The cultural identity of Greenlandic Inuit between nature and culture"), Frank Sowa argues that in today's world global discourses can have powerful effects on local communities. Taking the example of two global discourses (the ecological discourse and the discourse on Indigenous peoples), Sowa shows that they provide concepts and frames of reference that affect how Greenlandic Inuit are perceived by others, and how they see themselves. At the same time, these discourses can be used strategically in the global political arena, such as in debates at the International Whaling Commission (IWC) about the rights of Greenlandic Inuit to engage in whaling.

Written in German, the book consists of nine chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the theoretical framework. Sowa draws on Meyer's (2005) concept of "world polity," an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) based on a global cultural order, with strong roots in Western society. Discourses, informed by and legitimized through research in the humanities and the natural sciences, spread and are adopted locally. They provide models for understanding and representing oneself in relation to others and in relation to the natural environment.

The book's strength lies in its analyses of the characteristics and development of the two global discourses (Chapters 3 and 4) and of local actors' positioning with regard to these discourses, drawing on interviews in Greenland (Chapters 5 to 8) and Japan (Chapter 8). The ecological discourse (Chapter 3) and the discourse on Indigenous peoples (Chapter 4) are analyzed with impressive detail and historical depth. Both chapters offer insights from relevant scholarly literature and from analyses of key historical documents. Put simply (and without doing justice to the detailed argument presented by Sowa), the ecological discourse assumes an ideal state of nature that is threatened by industrialization and economic growth. Thus, nature becomes a scarce good that must be conserved through careful management informed by scientific research. Sowa traces the origins of this discourse to the late 19th century, with the coming together of the rational-scientific discourse and the aesthetic-moral discourse on nature, both with long histories in Western thought. Insights from research in economics and the natural sciences encouraged political activism in the 1980s, which in turn led to global dissemination and acceptance of this discourse.

Chapter 4 gives an historical overview of representations of Greenlandic Inuit from the 18th century to the early 21st century. Sowa notes that most of the representations were based on perceptions by outsiders (Danes and Europeans) and reflected their worldviews and values, rather than those of Greenlandic Inuit themselves. In the late 20th century, the image of the “noble ecological savage,” the predominant image at that time, was adopted by the Greenlandic intellectual and political elite. Greenlandic Inuit were portrayed as being close to and respectful of nature, as a people who always used their resources sustainably. Sowa argues that in light of the historical evidence (he refers to texts by Egede, Cranz, and Fabricius, as well as research by Sørby), this seems to be a retrospective, ideologically-based ascription that was deployed strategically by Greenlanders in order to obtain recognition and influence in global arenas.