

# Indigenism

Concept: Indigenism

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Description Indigenism (like indigeneity) is a term without a standard meaning. It has been used to refer to the policies of colonial governments as well as the responses of Indigenous peoples to those policies. The term is also in flux as Indigenous political actors respond to the dynamics of globalization. Several clear variations in use are apparent amongst scholars and activists, both Indigenous and not: some usages are closely linked with the political aspirations of Indigenous peoples, while others appear to be more analytical and descriptive.

For example, the anthropologist Ronald Niezen (2003, 4) has used the term to describe "the international movement that aspires to promote and protect the rights of the world's 'first peoples'." Embedded in this use of the term is the idea that local assertions of the cultural difference of Indigenous peoples, though frequently expressed in the language and symbolism of nations, only become fully visible through a global lens and can only be protected under a broadened understanding of universal principles of human rights. The strategy has been to bypass nation-states ??? who have rarely recognized Indigenous rights, sometimes even denying the existence of Indigenous peoples within their borders ??? and to present Indigenous concerns to higher political forums.

Consequently the goals of this "indigenism" are largely institutional: the creation of formal measures of protection of Indigenous peoples' rights under international law. The Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (passed as a resolution of the United Nations Assembly in September 2007) has been the key text in this campaign, but this activism has encouraged Indigenous participation in discussions about broader issues. For example, the successful campaign of Indigenous peoples in the Arctic for the inclusion of their interests in the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants suggests the possibility of a wider strategy, in which specific Indigenous rights are protected by being included in specific agreements that apply to all peoples. It may be some time, however, before we can observe the positive effect of new international instruments on the quality of Indigenous life.

By identifying as "indigenist," Cherokee scholar Ward Churchill aims to coordinate and unify the dispersed anti-colonial politics of Indigenous peoples. He argues (2003, 275) that his political motivation and justification "draws upon the traditions ??? the bodies of knowledge and corresponding codes of value ??? evolved over many thousands of years by native peoples the world over." Churchill sees similarly inspired Indigenous

activists all over the world and throughout history, who share a "spirit of resistance." Here the guiding premise is that imperialism and colonialism (and lately globalization) are fundamentally at odds with the truest characteristics of Indigenous life. To be inspired by tradition, therefore, is to resist these invasive and deracinating forces.

It is the fact that all Indigenous peoples can draw on their traditions as a mode of resistance that allows much broader identification to be made. Churchill cites the Mexican scholar Guillermo Bonfil Batalla to support this. Bonfil Batalla (Churchill 2003, 278-9) writes that within the Americas, "there exists only one unitary Indian civilization???the level of unity ??? the civilization ??? is more profound than the level of specificity (the cultures, the languages, the communities)." His notion of indigenism includes all activism that is informed or directed by the classical traditions of Indigenous peoples.

Observers of colonialism and Indigenous issues in Latin America coined the term *indigenismo*, to describe the ways that colonial nation-states have formulated their vision of Indigenous social inclusion. However one scholar, Alcida Rita Ramos, uses "indigenism" in the context of Brazilian Indigenous politics, to indicate new possibilities for the resolution of Indigenous peoples' political claims, possibilities that arise because of the complexity of the interactions between values, aspirations, and institutions that take place in the colonial setting. These include: "regional prejudice, urban commiseration, state control, anthropological curiosity, religious commitment, sensationalism in the media, [and] indigenous verbal, written, or gestural discourses" (1998, 7).

Though Ramos clearly offers a definition that includes the actions of non-Indigenous peoples (even where these may be detrimental to Indigenous interests), her use of the term describes a range of institutions and practices that translate and perhaps distort the ongoing imperatives of the state, allowing while circumscribing a resurgent sense of Indigenous autonomy. Indigenism in this sense is not solely something "Indigenous" but emerges in the context of highly complex and varied relationships between Indigenous peoples and the nations and the states in which they live.

In conclusion, we might say that it is only the emphasis on a new role for Indigenous agency that is a common feature in these selected ideas of "indigenism." We can see this as an attempt to break with a long history in which Indigenous agency was denied by representing Indigenous peoples as "savages," "beasts," or "children." But precisely what this ethical imperative now requires is clearly subject to interpretation: does Indigenous agency arise in the context of a new, allegedly post-national realm of universal values and the international institutions in which these are enshrined? Is it the quintessence of cultural life that becomes visible in moments of resistance as the assertion of Indigenous tradition? Or, is it the emergent character by which peoples on all sides of the colonial gulf may

try to experience their lives while sharing national and local spaces and resources? The term has at least as many uses as there are programs for Indigenous engagement with the contemporary world.

Work Cited:

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