The Origins of Indigenism

_HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY_

RONALD NIEZEN

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A New Global Phenomenon?

PRIMARY ATTACHMENTS
AND INTERNATIONAL IDENTITY

Anthropology is known for its tendency to focus on social microcosms, and the microcosm that I as an anthropologist have chosen to study is the world. Twenty or more years ago this would have made little sense. The bounded, preferably isolated, community would have been virtually the only option, the only way to establish one's credentials, to do respectable "fieldwork." Today, the broader goal of my work can be understood by most with an interest in social research as somehow reflecting the phenomenon of global "shrinking," associated with such things as the increasing mobility of people and the relatively instantaneous spread of information, ideas, and diseases.
One product of globalization is a revolt against the forces of cultural uniformity and against the appropriation of indigenous peoples' sovereignty by states. Its main premise is that by removing such people from their land, educating their children in state schools, eliminating their languages, and usurping their own systems of justice and conflict resolution, states are imposing a gray uniformity on all of humanity, stifling and suppressing the creative cultural energies of those who are most knowledgeable and prescient about the forces of nature. "Those who would destroy their way of life," states a report from the United Nations' International NGO Conference on Discrimination against Indigenous Populations in the Americas, "would first have us believe that this task is already accomplished. We now have proof to the contrary, and we have received, with gratitude, the message of harmony and respect for all life brought to us by an ancient people whose culture may still yet be allowed to make a worthy contribution to the world community of nations" (United Nations 1977: 21). One of the revealing things about this passage is its use of the singular to describe the numerous indigenous participants in a conference organized around the theme of discrimination against indigenous populations in the Americas. These delegations are somehow seen as speaking with one voice, representing a unified way of life defending itself against the destructive forces of modernity. The clearest expression of human diversity can thus be found in a category now widely referred to as "indigenous peoples"; yet the very creation of this category involves a common origin, is predicated upon global sameness of experience, and is expressed through the mechanisms of law and bureaucracy, the culprits most commonly associated with the steady gains of cultural uniformity. This in itself raises questions of a global nature. Under conditions not only of rapid travel, communication, and access to information but also of internationalized nationalism and the global advent of identical pressures of resource extraction upon subsistence-based communities and peoples, how are cultural differences being defended? And how does that defense in itself influence the way cultures and identities are reformulated?

A search of the term "indigenous" in book titles from twenty or more years ago might reveal only a scattering of botanical works on indige-
Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands) meet regularly in groups ranging in size from a dozen to several hundred to discuss the development of human rights standards for indigenous peoples. In this context the ambition to study the world can be realized, for in meeting rooms, usually in Europe, differences are being defended and changes wrought that do have global origins and implications. Indigenous internationalism is both a product of social convergence and an agent of it.

The United Nations is well known as an unfathomable bureaucracy and, frighteningly, also as the arbiter of the world’s important and usually bloody contests, but it is less recognized as a locus for village politics and for struggles between states and marginalized communities. In this new venture, in its regular meetings between indigenous and state representatives, it has created an original institutional space constituting a distinct social world.

The emerging identity and legal term “indigenous peoples” is embodied in those who sit together at indigenous conferences and working group meetings. The term was included in the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention (No. 107) Concerning the Protection and Integration of Indigenous and Other Tribal and Semi-Tribal Populations in Independent Countries (1957) and the accompanying ILO Recommendation (No. 104) of the same year, at a time when scholars still commonly referred to the subjects of their investigations as “primitives.” Yet members of the “indigenous populations” being referred to had little input into the convention (see chapter 3 below), and few, if any, had developed a self-referential “indigenous” identity. Today the term is both a fragile legal concept and the indefinite, unachievable sum of the historical and personal experiences of those gathered in a room who share, at the very least, the notion that they have all been oppressed in similar ways for similar motives by similar state and corporate entities.

The United Nations has thus become a new focal point of “indigenism,” a term I use to describe the international movement that aspires to promote and protect the rights of the world’s “first peoples.” These are the estimated three hundred million people from four thousand distinct societies, strongly attached to regions that were recently, and in a few instances still are, the world’s last “wild” places. They are those who share the claim to have survived on their lands through the upheavals of colonialism and corporate exploitation. Their unbroken ancestry is not seen as protecting them from the deleterious impacts of industrial and state ambitions. Their territories are imposed upon by extractive industries; their beliefs and rituals are imposed upon by those who would convert them (or selfishly acquire their knowledge); and their independence is imposed upon by states striving for political and territorial control. They are those people whose position in the modern world is the least tenable. They are especially vulnerable to warfare, genocide, dispossession, disease, and famine.

Indigenous peoples, like some ethnic groups, derive much of their identity from histories of state-sponsored genocide, forced settlement, relocation, political marginalization, and various formal attempts at cultural destruction. Indigenous peoples and ethnic groups alike can have primary attachments to land, and similar attachments derived from primordial use and occupancy of land—though perhaps with less spiritual resonance—can even be found in some groups commonly referred to as “ethnic.” How, then, can we usefully distinguish ethnic groups and indigenous peoples?

David Maybury-Lewis (1997) partially resolves this problem by outlining a continuum ranging from “indigenous/tribal peoples to indigenous (but not tribal) peoples, to peoples stigmatized as tribal, to people considered ethnic minorities, to people considered ethnic nationalities, though they coexist in a single state” (55). He concludes that “there are no distinctions that enable us to place societies unambiguously within these categories” (55). But a continuum of social organization does not do justice to the recent complexities of the international movement of indigenous peoples. The growing national and international influence of indigenous governments and nongovernmental organizations, combined with the concerns of some state representatives over the potential for indigenous chauvinism and secessionist politics, has reshuffled the order of things and provided grounds for a more direct comparison of ethnic nationalism and indigenism. I will develop this comparison more fully in chapter 6, but it is necessary to begin here by summarizing some of the features that make indigenism a distinct phenomenon.
INDIGENISM AND ETHNONATIONALISM

Assertions of distinct collective identities and claims to rights give every indication of increasing in salience. The growth of reinvigorated identity as a source of group membership and the pursuit of distinct rights to protect identity boundaries have increased almost exponentially during the past several decades. Paradoxically, bonds that are seen by community members as inherent, timeless, and indissoluble have been reformulated and given new political standing only very recently. The “We the Peoples” of the U.N. Charter was formulated in the years immediately after World War II, when it was still possible to argue, however misguided, that only natural boundaries separated distinct cultures. Islands, deserts, forests, and mountains created unique lifestyles and identities, much like the ecological niches of flora and fauna. Today it is much easier to see that other forces are at work in the reformulation of identities and that some of the strongest claims of difference are made by the marginalized and deracinated, by those who would otherwise be absorbed, eliminated, and forgotten by dominant societies. Cultural identities are stimulated by their denial, and the social landscape has far overtaken geography and ecology as the most important source of human differences.

Today we are witness to the fact that cultural and political barriers between human societies are in some ways being solidified by the breakdown of other barriers, mainly those that have to do with travel, communication, and access to information. As many anthropologists have recently pointed out, cultures are often impermanent, complex, “creolized,” hybrid, and contested. Culture is a verb, not a noun, a process, not a thing in itself. But an outcome of cultural overlapping and contestation—one that is not as frequently recognized as the impermanence that goes with it—is a process of sharpening boundaries, drawing identities more firmly, making unequivocal the division between those who belong and those who do not. Paradoxically, the solidifying of cultural boundaries is predicated upon the malleability of cultures—on the ability, especially by those with power, to reshape cultural properties and attachments, sometimes to make them fit more comfortably with political interests.

This is not to trivialize the importance of renewed identities for those who are attached to them. Recovering the past is usually seen as a matter of great importance for future survival. It requires a sense of urgency—distinct societies are easily overwhelmed by the forces of state centralization and large-scale projects resulting in loss of livelihood—and at the same time a delicate approach to piecing together constituent elements of culture that can be understood only as an intricate whole, sometimes barely visible through its internal complexities, tensions, and differences. The question “Who are we?” is thus being answered by empirically strengthening the “we” as an ethnic or indigenous entity.

The term “ethnicity” is sometimes used in a general way to refer to such reconstituting of collective identities, but the amount of power and the political goals, choices, and surrounding contexts of ethnic groups vary tremendously, making it nearly impossible to build globally applicable analytical models or sometimes even to get a handle on events as they happen. Not all ethnic groups or other minorities want to secede from states, and not all are violent (despite the imprint of the Balkans on our consciousness). Some are quietly dominated by states; others are the beneficiaries of federalism, consociation, regional autonomy, or other power-sharing arrangements. But where some of the most important analytical differences can be drawn is among those societies whose leaders voice unappeased discontent and unfulfilled yearnings for self-determination and whose ambitions at some level involve a rejection of the multicultural projects proposed by states and international organizations.

There are two categories of societies or “peoples” whose claims to self-determination can pose challenges to the constitutional uniformity of states and raise the issue—some might say the specter—of the politics of difference in international organizations. Ethnic groups are already familiar from a vast literature that began in the 1960s with questions surrounding the sources of ethnic differentiation in contexts of mobility and cultural interaction, a literature that has been kept alive by more recent concerns over the origins of nationalism, strident ethnonationalism, and interethnic conflict. Another type of claimant to self-determination, indigenous peoples, has made a more recent appearance on the international scene, with political objectives and strategies that differ in impor-
tant ways from those of other minorities. The differences between these two kinds of collective entity are sometimes overlooked, despite their relevance for the development of strategies against intolerance.

"Ethnonationalism" is the term sometimes given to those people who have defined their collective identities with clear cultural and linguistic contours and who express their goals of autonomy from the state with the greatest conviction and zeal, sometimes with hatreds spilling over into violence. In Canada, Québec sovereigntists have expressed their goal of an independent French-speaking nation-state mostly through the orderly, though occasionally disputed, mechanisms of referenda, the most recent in 1995 being defeated by the smallest possible margin, with the Parti Québécois since then promising to continue a strategy of orderly independence seeking. In other regions ethnonationalism is more turbulent. Stanley Tambiah, in his book *Leveling Crowds* (1996), has argued convincingly that ethnonationalist violence in India is a form of routine instability, often coordinated, or at least strategically manipulated, by those who stand to benefit from social and political cleavages. Ethnic groups often identify themselves in opposition to rival ethnicities, with rival claims to statehood. Some of the worst abuses of human rights in the past fifty years have occurred where these rival identities overlap and where there is no longer any overarching state power to keep their hostilities in check. In Africa, particularly Rwanda and the Congo, for example, the world has witnessed to its horror some of the most lethal genocidal violence since the Holocaust, the outcome of ethnically inspired hatred. Such events overshadow more numerous conflicts in other parts of the world in which political claims based upon cultural distinctiveness and occupancy of territories are frustrated, leading to revolt or to violent repression by states, or sparking unrest from rival groups. Even within the category "ethnonationalism," therefore, there is great variety and an absence of predictability. What we do find very often, however, is that ethnonationalists’ expressed political aspirations take the form of an independent nation-state, occasionally a nation-state purified or "cleansed" of its rival minorities. At some level, therefore, they have signed on to the notion of equality as a goal of liberation; except that to them equality within an existing state is neither the best guarantee of collective security nor the best way to express their collective being. Equality can truly be realized only through the highest form of recognized difference: statehood.

Many of the patterns commonly recognized in the identity formations of ethnic nationalisms—above all the development of a historiography through which the ethnic group sees itself as a unique community, the infusion of collective identity with exclusivist moral imperatives, and the use of identity to consolidate and pursue political goals—are shared with indigenous identity. Indigenism, however, is not a particularized identity but a global one that acts almost the same way as ethnic particularism. It sets social groups and networks apart from others in a global "we-they" dichotomy. It identifies a boundary of membership and experience that can be crossed only by birth or hard-won international recognition. It links local, primordial sentiments to a universal category.

The origins of indigénism (discussed more fully in chapter 2) are much more clear than were the coalescing of nationalism in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century expansion of European states, the contagion effects of decolonization, and the contests of rival ethnonationalisms. The indigenous peoples’ movement has arisen out of the shared experiences of marginalized groups facing the negative impacts of resource extraction and economic modernization and, as Benedict Kingsbury (1998) sagely notes, the social convergence and homogenization that these ambitions tend to bring about (42). Indigenous identity has also grown largely out of the institutions of successful nationalisms themselves; the international legislative bodies of states—the United Nations and its satellite agencies—have provided the conceptual origins and practical focus of indigenous identity. With little public awareness, and with the obvious terminology ("indigenism") little used up to this point, an international movement has led to the creation of an important new "ism."

One of the distinguishing marks of this movement is the extent to which, unlike ethnonationalism, it is grounded in international networks. In Asia, for example, transnational networks of indigenous organizations are new sources of ideas, identity, legitimacy, and money for groups and communities that were once thoroughly marginalized (Barnes, Gray, and Kingsbury 1995: chs. 1–4). Similar transnational networks are built into indigenous organizations themselves, such as the Inuit Circumpolar
Conference, the International Indian Treaty Council, and the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous organizations defending local attachments to land and simple subsistence technologies make use of electronic media and technologies of communication and transportation to establish and maintain international connections. 12

Ethnic groups, by contrast, tend to see their experiences of oppression and marginalization as uniquely their own and their suffering as a source of inspiration that cannot be shared with those who do not belong. Politically active members of ethnic groups may be aware of others who experience a similar fate, sometimes at the hands of the same oppressor-state, but there is almost always at least a hint, if not a full measure, of in-group exclusiveness that discourages solidarity with “outsiders.” The claim to statehood pursued by many ethnic groups, more than anything else, has a dampering effect on interethnic sociability. If any such claim is as good as the next, what value is there in independence? More to the point, if too many claims are made, what happens to any one group's chances of success? Ethnic groups are like auditioners for a drama on the world's stage, unwilling to reveal too much of themselves to their rivals in their competition for the cast list.

Indigenous peoples have more collective goals and work more cooperatively to achieve them. The mere fact that indigenous leaders gather in international meetings to share experiences and pursue collective strategies suggests a greater degree of global interaction. There are, of course, groups and regional blocs that tend to go their own way, making consistent strategy frustratingly elusive (and at least one indigenous representative at U.N. meetings is so out of sync with the indigenous caucus that he is sometimes privately accused of espionage and political sabotage on behalf of states), but the general climate in which indigenous delegations function is one of shared experience and intensive collaboration.

Indigenous history is “invented” in different ways than are the narratives of large ethnic groups or nation-states. It is developed largely in response to oppression, usually at the hands of the state. This makes indigenous historical identity, like that of many ethnonationalisms, in large measure a counterpoint to state domination, based largely upon victimization. But, much more than ethnonationalism, indigenous identity both struggles against and is implicated with popular stereotyping—usurpation by the spiritual eclecticism of the New Age movement and other sources of popular romanticism. Many of the ecological, spiritual, and egalitarian ideals associated with indigenous identity have thus been distorted by pseudosympathizers. Rousseau’s portrayal of humans emerging from a state of nature as robust, guileless, and quintessentially democratic was an early form of third-party representation that has become more potent as those weakened by policies of cultural annexation have sought to reconstitute themselves. 13 There is, in popular imaginings of the inherently ecological Indian or egalitarian hunter, an element of fertile nostalgia, a longing for things that cannot be found in conditions of modernity. Indigenous leaders must struggle against a temptation to take both libels and outrageous flattery as the truth about themselves and their peoples.

One of these externally imagined, then internalized, identities is the very notion of an international underclass or “underethnicity” known as “indigenous peoples.” It is a category of human society first invented through human rights reforms, then adapted, internalized, personalized, and collectively transformed by “indigenous peoples” themselves, with conviction and occasionally strident passion.

GRIEVANCE, RIGHTS, AND IDENTITY

If some of the most cherished aspects of indigenous identity (including the term itself) come from quarters that have little or nothing to do with indigenous people or societies, where does the near-global attachment to this identity come from? A radically constructivist approach to identity, besides offering insult to those with cherished assumptions about ageless traditions, tends to be dismissive of such important questions as the circumstances under which a new identity gains acceptance, who benefits from its acceptance, who opposes it, and why some accept or oppose it. It is important to recognize that indigenous identity is invoked by a minority of educated leaders in any given society, by an intelligentsia. It is part of a shifting continuum or bricolage of identities ranging from the in-
dividual actor to the family, clan, tribal group, language group, village, region, province, nation, and, not least of all, international affiliation. Under what circumstances is indigenous identity invoked or added on to other markers, and by whom?

The revival of indigenous identities has taken place largely through the medium of writing and is occasionally expressed in the formal style and logic of law. Whatever incompatibilities we might suppose to exist between written and oral cultures, the permanence and protections of written resolutions have great appeal among those faced with instability, impermanence, and, ultimately, isolated defeat. Indigenous revival cannot be understood without reference to the technology, power, and legitimacy of states. Renewed tradition confers a shared identity and sense of community on those faced with racial segregation and the stigmas associated with identification as an underclass of the underprivileged. At some point in the colonization of indigenous nations, a tremendous disparity between the technology and organizational powers of dominant and dominated peoples makes itself felt. It is astonishing, under the circumstances, how readily indigenous peoples have tended to borrow and adapt useful features of majority societies with little or no apparent disruption. But when social and technological powers are associated with direct assaults on indigenous identity and esteem through the inherently contradictory vehicles of racism and assimilation, indigenous societies become infected with cultural malaise—a widespread sense of wounded pride, violated honor, and lack of self-esteem.

In response to the tremendous pressures and opportunities inherent in this major social transition, many groups have reformulated and codified what they could of the accumulated traditional memory. Cumulatively, many small efforts of this kind have produced a global cultural revolution, little noticed by outside observers because of the relative insignificance of its components. These traditional orthodoxies are not uncontested, even in their communities of origin, but they have one attraction that sets them apart from all rivals, whether Christianity and other scriptural religions, state-sponsored nationalism, or liberal human rights universalism: reinvigorated traditional values and worldviews are identified as indigenous, as having always existed. They confer pride of ownership (and to some extent authorship) on their adherents. They belong to no other. They are permanent and inalienable. Through the new written and visual media that transcend the memories, and even the temporal presence, of elders, traditional ideas and values have acquired the imprimatur of orthodoxy.

But it is a special kind of orthodoxy. Notwithstanding a few widely prevailing notions of indigenous peoples’ innate environmental wisdom, what really sets this cultural movement apart is its absence of centralized dogma. Its main ideas coalesce within a large number of micronationalisms and micro-orthodoxies, each a discrete movement oriented toward small communities or regions but at the same time communicated to other, like-minded indigenous nations by networks of news exchange through telephone, fax, and e-mail communication and international meetings. Indigenousism involves reinvigoration of the comfort and color of local traditions with the safety-in-numbers effect of a global movement.

In the absence of a uniform creed, membership is usually determined by birth. Outsiders of various kinds can be given nominal or provisional membership, but at the international level, to belong—to unquestionably participate as an indigenous person—one has to represent an indigenous nation, preferably as an elected leader, at the very least as a citizen. And within the indigenous nation itself it is mostly blood and place of parentage that determine who belongs and who does not.

Such observations, however, still do not tell us what truly inspires the movement or whence it originates. The varied, sometimes discordant, voices of indigenous leaders at international gatherings are consistent at some points, consistent in ways that provide clues as to the origins of their identity and its appeal (the theme of chapter 3). Stories from the victims of dictatorships—of such horrors as secret massacres, forced relocations, imprisonment without trial, and torture—find resonance with indigenous delegates from democratic states who have had merely to contend with imposed megaproject development, dispossession, broken treaties, loss of subsistence, and the imposition of tormented idleness. A patriotic citizen can, in defense of hearth and homeland, often endure hardship, even torture, with a sense of purpose. A common experience of those who identify themselves as indigenous, however, is a sense of illegitimate, meaningless, and dishonorable suffering.

The collective suffering that transposes onto identity is usually multi-
generational. It can be separated by the space of decades, perhaps even centuries, from the immediate horrors of dispossession and death, kept alive by stories or written histories, to be recalled later, like the rekindling of smoldering ashes.

Only in recent years has such experience found an outlet in the standard-setting activities of international organizations, channeled into the work of achieving higher state standards of justice and accountability. The ambitious goals of indigenous peoples’ initiatives are no less than the global improvement of health and prevention of repression and political violence among the approximately three hundred million people categorized as “indigenous.”

International organizations are at their slowest and most frustratingly cumbersome, however, when pursuing ambitious goals that do not necessarily correspond with government perceptions of state interests. This seems especially true when one is closely involved, representing an organization or constituency that expects to see results—and when these results are continually transforming into promises that seem to recede ever further into the future.

At the same time, however, the unity of indigenous people as a social category, above all as compatriots in suffering, occasionally receives independent confirmation by high-ranking international officials. Measures for the protection and promotion of indigenous cultures were supported in an April 2000 meeting of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights by Alfredo Sfeir-Younis of the World Bank, who stated that institutional ignorance of indigenous cultures is “like burning the library before reading the books” (United Nations 2000: 2). And Mary Robinson (2000), U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, addressing a February 2000 Working Group on the Permanent Forum for Indigenous People, conceded that “indigenous peoples are . . . one of the most excluded and marginalized groups in society” (5). Her encouragement of the establishment of a new and unprecedented forum for indigenous peoples at a high level in the U.N. system is a further indication of the momentum that is building to eliminate the “scourge of racism” in the relationships of many states with their indigenous inhabitants.

Indigenous peoples are increasingly viewed as canaries in the iron cage of modernity. There is nothing equivocal, metaphorical, or too terribly mysterious about the demise of an indigenous society when it occurs. Sociohistorical autopsies reveal consistent patterns of conquest, genocide, ethnocide, and political marginalization. Indigenism is an identity, like that which unifies survivors of the Holocaust, grounded in evidence, testimony, and collective memory.

FORMS OF RESISTANCE

The international movement of indigenous peoples also acts very differently from patterns of resistance in politically marginal communities described in the anthropological literature. For example, indigenous lobbying and political mobilization is a far cry from the “ordinary” forms of resistance by powerless groups examined in James Scott’s widely cited Weapons of the Weak (1985)—the “food dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth [which] . . . require little or no coordination or planning[,] . . . represent a form of individual self-help; and . . . typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms” (29). These actions are premised upon people lacking formal organization and have little in common with the presentations of indigenous delegates to conferences and closed sessions of international political forums.

More public attention is paid to violent insurrections—and the usually more violent suppression of them by governments. Such events as the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas, Mexico (Collier 1994; Harvey 1998), the indigenous uprising and its ruthless suppression in the western high plateau of Guatemala in 1980 (Burgos-Debray 1984), the 1973 siege at Wounded Knee, South Dakota (Mathiessen 1983: ch. 3), and the Mohawk standoff against the Sureté de Québec and the Canadian Armed Forces at Oka (York and Pindera 1991) are among the most dramatic expressions of frustration at broken government treaties and promises, destruction of lands without compensation, and political marginalization. Armed resistance is a dubious strategy for reform, leading more often than not to violent repression by the state rather than to the desired con-
cessions. The international indigenous peoples' movement addresses many of the same issues that lie behind rebellions and insurrections, but without violence or even illegal forms of protest. Instead, indigenous representatives are taking their complaints to international forums, striving to be involved at the highest level possible in international politics. The international movement of indigenous peoples is an emerging form of political resistance.

For those indigenous spokespersons who initiated the process of international lobbying, this was an especially daring strategy. It represented a new use of the international bodies of states to overcome the domestic abuses of states themselves, while pursuing development and recognition of international standards concerning the rights of indigenous peoples. The development of an international movement of indigenous peoples in recent decades reflects a changing alignment of political advocacy and shows some indigenous leaders to be, despite their limited power and resources, among the most effective political strategists on the contemporary national and international scenes. Underestimating the abilities of indigenous leaders and organizations to maneuver through complex international forums would result in a number of missed opportunities, the most significant of which would be to reconsider the place of indigenous leadership internationally, nationally, and locally and to speculate on the potential for an effective international movement of indigenous peoples to reconfigure state powers and alter, however slightly, the influence of state-sponsored nationalism.

**EQUALITY AND LIBERATION**

If post-Enlightenment Western thought sees toleration "not as a utilitarian expedient to avoid destructive strife, but as an intrinsic value" (Berlin 1998: 581), how did it come to pass that indigenous peoples have been so badly treated, so little tolerated? One possibility that stands out is that the implications of the categories "indigenous," "native," "aboriginal," and "First Nation" lie outside the accepted norms of nation-states and the traditions of liberal democracy. An end to discrimination, but on special terms; a desire to participate in the state, while defying restraints imposed by the state—the actions and objectives of indigenous peoples are often seen as contradictory, above all as contradicting the goals of state sovereignty and constitutional uniformity. The paradoxes of indigenous rights in some ways also run contrary to the realized aims of the civil rights movement and the antiracism of decolonization. Distinct indigenous rights go beyond rights based upon individual equality. Assimilation and extinguishment of collective rights thus continue to find powerful exponents.

As a liberation movement, indigennism thus stands apart from the twentieth century's most exalted freedom struggles: decolonization, apartheid, and civil rights. Each of these predecessors was in some way fixed upon a goal of equality. Mahatma Gandhi turned to archaic village-based simplicity and asceticism as an answer to the challenges of modernity, but his demand for independence ultimately became transformed into a mass movement of predominantly Hindu nationalism that embraced rapid industrialization. Free of British rule, postcolonial India, like most subsequent postcolonial states, sought national and industrial development as a new source of identity, power, and dignity. Decolonization held out the promise of membership in the community of nations, the possibility for each new state of attaining a stature in some ways equal to that of the former colonizing power.

The antiapartheid and the civil rights movements both sought to erase the racial barriers to equality within states. Liberation meant breaking down the racially discriminatory obstacles to education, work, mobility, and power. Freedom from the yoke of segregation meant the participation of all races in a shared social world. All were to have the same access to the ordinary pleasures and extraordinary opportunities provided by a just constitution. The great achievement of these movements was to make similar investments in defending human dignity at lunch counters, at drinking fountains, and in political offices.

Indigenous peoples are not engaged in a liberation struggle that aspires primarily or exclusively toward nationalist or racial equality. "Assimilation" and "cultural genocide" are terms commonly used by indigenous leaders to describe the kind of censorious "equality" that was
often (and in many cases continues to be) imposed on them by religious organizations and states. Their principal goal is rather the recognition of distinct collective rights (the implications of which are discussed further in chapter 4). For most indigenous peoples, liberation means an honorable relationship with states in which their rights to land are affirmed and compensation for their losses and suffering is honorably provided. Liberation means the ability to exercise self-determination, to develop culturally distinct forms of education, spirituality, economic development, justice, and governance. The most common goals of indigenous peoples are not so much individual-oriented racial equality and liberation within a national framework as the affirmation of their collective rights, recognition of their sovereignty, and emancipation through the exercise of power.

**WHO ARE THE “INDIGENOUS”?**

The controversy surrounding the international movement of indigenous peoples includes not just struggles over land, resources, recognition, and sovereignty but also, perhaps as a prelude to all other contests, the complex, delicate issue of defining the term “indigenous.” This is becoming all the more pertinent as the term is increasingly associated with new rights and benefits (especially political power) and as the peoples claiming indigenous status emerge with greater frequency and insistence from Africa and Asia—in other words, from hemispheres that differ from the Americas in terms of the complexities of historical settlement, colonialism, and, above all, the development of various authoritarian state systems that resulted from national liberation of former European colonies in the mid- to late twentieth century. How do people from within these diverse social and historical contexts fit into a widening rubric of “indigenous peoples”?

Indigenous delegates to international meetings have often expressed the idea that a precise, legal definition of the term “indigenous” would impose standards or conditions for participation in human rights processes that would be prejudicial to their interests. For one thing, such a definition would be controlled by the very state powers that they see as the principal source of their exploitation, marginalization, and suffering. What is more, Member States of the United Nations do not follow a formal definition of the nation or the state, so a double standard would be applied to indigenous peoples if the terms that are key to their benefits of belonging were interpreted too inflexibly.

The lack of a rigorous definition of the term “indigenous” also presents a challenge to scholarly analysis. But this state of affairs is in some ways preferable: a rigorous definition, one that in effect tried to close the intellectual borders where they were still porous, would be premature and, ultimately, futile. Debates over the problem of definition are actually more interesting than any definition in and of itself. With this as our starting point, we find that there are multiple approaches to the term “indigenous,” each with its own political origins and implications. The ambiguity of the term is perhaps its most significant feature.

“Indigenous peoples” have been provisionally defined in three basic ways: legally/analytically (the “other” definition), practically/strategically (the self-definition), and collectively (the global in-group definition). The analytical approach seeks to isolate those distinctive phenomena among the original inhabitants of given territories that coalesce into a global category. The exercise is frustrating because of the historical and social diversity of those who identify themselves as “indigenous.” The question of definition thus has the inherent effect of pitting analysis against identity; there will inevitably be a group, seeing itself as indigenous, that is excluded from the scholarly definition, its pride assaulted, its honor tarnished, and, more to the point, its access to redress obstructed.

There are nevertheless some areas of general consensus among formal attempts at definition. The most commonly recognized features of indigenous peoples are descent from original inhabitants of a region prior to the arrival of settlers who have since become the dominant population; maintenance of cultural differences, distinct from a dominant population; and political marginality resulting in poverty, limited access to services, and absence of protections against unwanted “development.” These features can be found in a seminal 1987 U.N. report by José Martínez Cobo:
Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present nondominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems. (48)

Comprehensive and durable as Martínez Cobo’s definition is, it does not apply unfailingly to all situations in which people claim indigenous status and protections. It does not fit comfortably, for example, with those areas of mainland Southeast Asia in which there have been complex patterns of displacement and movements of peoples across national boundaries. Some analytical approaches to defining indigenous peoples have attempted to take such complexities into account, principally by noting the possibility that indigenous peoples might not currently occupy their ancestral territories. According to James Anaya (1996), communities and nations are considered indigenous because they have deeper attachments to the lands in which they live (or ancestral lands from which they were removed) than the more powerful sectors of society that have either settled on those same lands or benefited in other ways from their resources (3). The legal approach to indigenous peoples has also developed the presupposition of their coexistence with another ethnic group, dominant either within a present-day state or within the area traditionally inhabited by the indigenous people. “There must be another ethnic group and a power relationship involved before the descendants of the original inhabitants are understood as indigenous in the legal meaning of the term” (Scheinin 2000: 161).

Martínez Cobo’s working definition has also been contested by some states. India, for example, has rejected its self-definitional aspect (included in the words “consider themselves”) and has pressed for what I would call a “gatekeeper definition,” one used to determine who can and cannot have access to U.N. meetings and the possibility they provide, however remote, of restorative justice. India has presented the view that it represents nearly one billion indigenous people (the entire population of the burgeoning nation) and that there is no need for others to present claims of indigenous ancestry that rival those of the state. This approach received support from Miguel Alfonso Martínez’s (1999) study of indigenous peoples and treaties for the United Nations: “[I]n post-colonial Africa and Asia autochthonous groups/minorities/ethnic groups/peoples who seek to exercise rights presumed to be or actually infringed by the existing autochthonous authorities in the States in which they live cannot . . . claim for themselves, unilaterally and exclusively, the ‘indigenous’ status in the United Nations context” (para. 88).

Such reasoning runs squarely into the claims of indigenous peoples themselves, and not just those from Africa or Asia, who argue that only they, as self-determining people, can determine who they are, regardless of what the state may wish of them. It matters little to those who are marginalized whether their oppressor has itself undergone a history of colonialism and passage from freedom into statehood. No one group has a monopoly on the promulgation of stigma and discrimination. It is like the intergenerational nature of family violence: the abused learn to practice abuse with greater refinement.

The disjuncture between analysis and identity has led to the implementation of a practical definition of “indigenous peoples.” To avoid such thorny issues as those raised by Alfonso Martínez’s report, the Working Group on Indigenous Populations has, since its inception in 1982, maintained an open-door policy toward participation in its annual two-week-long gathering of indigenous groups and organizations. One might expect this to be a source of mystification like an Oriental paradox—the definition of no definition, the color of the wind. But the real paradox is that it works: indigenous delegates come to the meetings with little insecurity about their own status as “indigenous,” and few open doubts about the claims of others.

A notable exception occurred in the 1999 Working Group meeting when a representative of the Rehoboth Baster Community entered himself on the speakers’ list and read a prepared statement outlining the Rehoboth’s grievances with the government of Namibia. The Rehoboth Basters are descendants of indigenous Khoi and Afrikaans settlers who
claim that, with Namibia's independence in 1990, they were deprived of their traditional form of self-government; had their communal land expropriated, thus losing their means of subsistence based upon cattle raising; and were denied use of their mother tongue in administration, justice, education, and public life.21 To most other indigenous delegates, however, the Rehoboth represent a dominant white community whose claim to African homelands is spurious and who represent a backlash against Namibian independence. As the Rehoboth delegate spoke, hundreds of indigenous delegates silently left the room, then resumed their seats when he had finished. The chairperson of the meeting, Dr. Erica-Irene Daes, responded to this human tide of protest by remarking how odd it was that the call of nature should affect so many at the same time.

This brings us to the third definition of indigenous peoples, one informally developed and acted upon by indigenous delegates themselves.21 This definition has never been made explicit or committed to writing. It begins with the fact that the leaders of indigenous communities and organizations are always careful to distinguish their identity and experience from those of states. Indigenous peoples are not mere extensions of state policy, so it will not do simply to refer to the "aboriginal peoples of Canada," the "Indians of the United States," the "indigenous peoples of Brazil," and so on. For indigenous representatives, the impulse to seek a wider identity is often regional, sometimes community based, and occasionally individual. It seems to begin with a sense of regional solidarity with those who share similar ways of life and histories of colonial and state domination that then grows into the realization that others around the world share the same experience.

There is thus a global aspect to indigenous identity, rarely expressed overtly, that functions as the basis for bringing people together in international meetings. It is close to a practical implementation of Martínez Cobo's definition, without any of the impediments or rancor of a formal system of membership. There is, nevertheless, a clear awareness among indigenous delegates of who represents an indigenous people or organization and who does not. Entering an indigenous caucus meeting as an observer has some of the same feel to it as being a scarcely tolerated visitor in a remote village. There is little overt unfriendliness, but at the same time there is a palpable sense of bonds uniting others that a mere observer can never fully share.

What is the basis of that connection? A glance around the room shows a striking variety, seemingly the entire range of human appearance and costume (including tattoos and decorative scarification). Within this variety there is an attachment that all participants share to some form of subsistence economy, to a territory or homeland that predates the arrival of settlers and surveyors, to a spiritual system that predates the arrival of missionaries, and to a language that expresses everything that is important and distinct about their place in the universe. Most importantly, they share the destruction and loss of these things. Their cultural markers gain self-conscious significance the more they are diminished by outside forces. They also share the corresponding commitment to find stability and restorative justice—even if it means using the very tools of literacy and law that, in other hands, are responsible for their oppression.

What many seek to achieve, whether realistically or not, is a correction of the historical deficit, an opportunity to present their own experience alongside the exclusionary and incomplete accounts of the founding of states, or what Prasenjit Duara (1995) describes as "the false unity of a self-same, national subject evolving through time" (4). Historical narrowness is inseparable from repression. Possessing, with the blinding clarity of a revealed truth, an original founding story that includes all the mistakes, betrayals, and bloodshed of nations built upon the lives of others is felt to be a first step toward liberation.

THE VIEW FROM AFAR

It is tempting to romanticize the efforts of indigenous leaders at the United Nations and to overestimate their impact on world affairs. The language of participants in the process of human rights standard setting provides us with a reality check and a reminder that significant obstacles remain to be overcome before a new order of relations between indigenous peoples and the state can be said to have truly arrived. International meetings of indigenous leaders are junctures of histories, longings, and
potentialities. Each person in attendance brings an inheritance of oppression in some ways held in common with others; each has (sometimes extravagant) expectations of the world community’s power to bring about change; and each must come to terms with a reality in which the work of human rights is slow, halting, and often ineffectual. As a whole, Member States of the United Nations do not seem to have been as responsive to efforts to define and protect the rights of indigenous peoples as they have been to other human rights initiatives. “The International Year of the World’s Indigenous People,” Erica-Irene Daes (1993) commented after the 1993 U.N. dedication, “is about to become the poorest and smallest event of its kind in the history of the United Nations” (v). She went on to remark: “It continues to be a matter of great disappointment to indigenous peoples, and to me, that some Member States cannot yet agree to include them in the family of nations. In an age which has overcome racism, racial discrimination and colonialism in so many fields, there are Member States that still perpetuate a myth as old as the European Colonization of the Americas: that indigenous peoples are legally unequal to other peoples” (v). In 1994, in the forty-eighth session of the U.N. General Assembly, an International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People was proclaimed, intended as a springboard for the promotion of a Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the establishment of a permanent forum for indigenous peoples, and pursuit of the issues of indigenous peoples and development (General Assembly Resolution 48/163). Yet for representatives such as Ted Moses (1997), ambassador of the Grand Council of the Crees, the progress of the decade on the important goals it was intended to achieve was negligible and disappointing: “The International Decade of the World’s Indigenous Peoples appears to be an orphan within the U.N. system. It is barely recognized or acknowledged by the United Nations and appears not to affect the work of the United Nations” (1).

Why, given the glacial progress of indigenous interests at the United Nations, do so many organizations and peoples send delegates to meetings? The exhaustion of domestic (intrastate) remedies for redressing grievances is a starting point for seeking justice elsewhere. And despite the slow pace of change within the U.N. system, there is the faint possibility that an international agency just might act with urgency and effectiveness. Like many social movements, the gatherings of indigenous leaders at the United Nations are driven by the prospect of sudden and dramatic change to their conditions of life. There are no signs of apocalyptic or revolutionary fervor at these meetings, but they nevertheless provide mundane venues for the expression of extravagant hope.

It is relatively easy to understand the persistence of indigenous peoples in the face of disappointment; similarly, the reasons for the apparently active disinterest of states lie fairly close to the surface. International recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples includes recognition of a wide range of safeguards and rights, including control over valuable natural resources and, as some state representatives see it, the potential for acquisition of a level of international representation and acceptance of international principles of self-governance that raise the alarming specter of breakaway indigenous states. This concern, whether justified or not, has been an obstacle to virtually every significant initiative to recognize and secure indigenous rights in the U.N. system.

Taking a longer view, however, puts things in a different light. Consideration of less than a century of world politics makes it possible to see that the international movement of indigenous peoples has introduced extraordinary changes, especially during the past several decades and especially in the so-called developed countries. Although indigenous identity tends to be reinforced by the devices of timelessness and permanence, the term itself and the political climate in which it took root are products of the latter half of the twentieth century.

Now that this chapter has presented the case that indigenism is a significantly distinct global phenomenon, at least not to be confused with ethnonationalism or a civil rights form of struggle for equality, the obvious next step is to determine its antecedents: how, when, and for what motives it came into being. I make a foray into these questions in chapters 2 and 3. In chapter 2 my main objective is to illustrate the way indigenous sovereignty was responded to differently by the international organizations of states at the beginning and at the end of the twentieth century. This contrast of the two responses includes discussion not only of what
motivated indigenous activism in the League of Nations and later the United Nations but also of how these forums have responded differently to indigenous appeals for recognition of their sovereignty, control of their territory, and preservation of their cultural distinctiveness. The change in responses to indiggenom over the twentieth century and a summary of the global changes that have produced it highlight the recent emergence of new forms and exercises of indigenous internationalism.

Chapter 3 approaches the historical questions with a more ethnographic comparison between the experiences of marginalization, oppression, and claims of special rights by one indigenous society in Canada and another in West Africa. These two cases allow me to discuss some of the various ways distinct societies or peoples claiming indigenous identity are marginalized and diminished by states, dominant ethnic groups, and multinational corporations. Although I do not attempt to present the complete toolkit of oppression employed against distinct societies, the strategies I have encountered—and those that seem to most clearly stimulate grievance and identity politics—range from ethnocidal policies (such as, for example, language- and culture-effacing state education) to the perpetration of ethnic cleansing (such as, for example, forced relocation, massacres, and extrajudicial executions). The Canada/Africa comparison also reveals something of the history of the indigenous peoples' movement itself, for it was through an extension of participation in international consultations and standard-setting exercises to self-identifying indigenous peoples from Africa and Asia in the 1990s that the indigenous peoples' movement became more fully global.

There is a common belief, sometimes quite literally an article of faith, that the opportunities for restorative justice through human rights instruments and procedures hold the key for distinct societies to find peace, prosperity, empowerment, and fulfillment of a need for cultural expression. But such hopes cannot be acted upon without in some ways simultaneously being diminished. In particular, the area of overlap between two issues (which I discuss in chapter 4) that are usually discussed separately—cultural relativism versus ethical universalism and collective versus individual rights—presents significant dilemmas for those whose goals are indigenous cultural preservation and self-determination. Starkly put, affirmation of collective rights is being sought through legal channels grounded in liberal individualism. Oral cultures are being defended by the mechanisms of bureaucracy and law—formal, written rules and procedures. To what extent, under these circumstances, is the defense of distinct culture self-defeating? Human rights universalism also highlights the dilemmas present for those who study indigenous societies. Relativism in anthropology is especially challenged by the transitions taking place in every distinct society—the advent of new elites, new uses of technology, and new sources of power, but also new avenues of discrimination by states and by distinct societies claiming rights of self-determination. Yet many anthropologists are understandably resistant to universals, with the discipline as a whole grounded largely in the notion that standards of judgment should come from within societies and that the imposition of values or ethical norms from outside leads to ethnocentric intolerance. This lends itself easily to a rejection of human rights universals or a concern with the variegated cultural meaning of group behavior that has the effect of diminishing the effectiveness of universals. On the other hand, those who seek universals, who perceive abuses within tradition or witness needless misery resulting from the transitions of modernity, sometimes do so intuitively and risk acting upon the subjective standards of ethnocentric reflex, or they interpret human rights in a way that unintentionally strengthens the hand of states, usually by overlooking the legitimate boundaries of self-determination by distinct societies. Is there a way to profit from human rights universalism, to apply an ethical system based ideally upon culture-transcending consensus and knowledge, without compromising distinct cultural identity or shoring up illegitimate elites?

One of the ways that internationally active indigenous leaders are seeking to apply human rights to their own interests is to prioritize recognition by states and international organizations of indigenous self-determination. In chapter 5, I discuss the implications of this strategy for the development of human rights standards specific to indigenous peoples and some of the ways the assertion of self-determination influences indigenous-state relations. The pursuit of self-determination, while clearly a resistance strategy in its own right, has led to the development and use of other forms of resistance by peoples and minorities on the margins of nation-states. The development of local laws and other exer-
cies of inherent legal authority are taking place in some indigenous communities and organizations and are possible in others, largely encouraged by recognition of the wide implications of indigenous self-determination. Another recent use of the human rights system is as a focal point of embarrassment—the "politics of shame," or use of the electronic and print media, political lobbying, and public relations campaigns to communicate the neglect and abuses of states and corporations to wide audiences of citizens and consumers. This tactic has been effectively applied by indigenous organizations to encourage government recognition of indigenous peoples' distinct claims to self-determination and of the need to provide subsidized, semiautonomous regional administrations. It is the only real leverage possible in a human rights system that, aside from several criminal tribunals pursuing war crimes and acts of genocide, for the most part is lacking in meaningful sanctions against states or those in control of state power.

Chapter 6 considers other political implications of indigenous peoples' assertions of self-determination and use of the symbols of statehood. Are indigenous claims of "nationhood" and self-determination, as some state representatives assert, likely to lead to new possibilities for indigenous secessions from states and thus the violent instability that we now associate with the separatist demands of some ethnic groups? Even if indigenous peoples pose no such threat, are their claims to distinct status within nation-states something that can be productively affirmed and acted upon by state governments, or do they go too far beyond liberal expectations of equality and protection of individual rights? Do indigenous peoples represent a form of civil society that can fruitfully resist the centralizing and homogenizing tendencies of states, or should there be more international concern over new possibilities of human rights abuses by increasingly powerful indigenous political entities? And are indigenous demands for recognition part of a more general decline in the identities of nation-states and their ability to remain (or become) cohesive?

Such questions, however, cannot be addressed, or even meaningfully posed, until other things are in place, including some consideration of when, why, and how the international movement of indigenous peoples began.

2 The Origins of the International Movement of Indigenous Peoples

THE RECENT EMERGENCE OF INTERNATIONAL REDRESS

It can be argued that relations between indigenous peoples and colonial powers have always been international, since the signing of treaties included a tacit or explicit acknowledgment that the original inhabitants of a territory were "nations," to be dealt with through existing mechanisms of international negotiation, conquest, and secession of land and sovereignty through treaties. Only as the balance of power shifted in favor of immigrant peoples with a growing settler population, increased military power, and the decimation of indigenous populations through diseases of European origin was the status of indigenous peoples as nations reappraised and legally diluted. Thus, in one form or another, indigenous peoples came to be seen as minority groups inevitably to be assimilated
with states, based on state obligations of trusteeship. They are connected to other like-minded and similarly constituted groups through national and international networks, making irredentism sanctionable by a global indigenous community. And their identities are based in large measure on forms of subsistence that are at odds with the economic and institutional requirements of statehood.

At the same time, there is nothing about indigenous nationalism that makes it inherently more virtuous, peaceable, or rights abiding than other foundations for group identity. Renewed indigenous identity emerging out of oppression, marginalization, and wounded pride can have the same tendencies toward exclusivism, intolerance, discrimination, and misguided zeal as in any society under similar circumstances. This leads to a more difficult problem: Do reinvigorated indigenous societies pose the danger of a new form of tyranny that combines the social restrictions of segmentary society with the state's powers of domination? Or can they to some degree meet the high expectations placed on them, represent higher standards of environmental sustainability and stewardship, successfully combine consensus politics and democracy, and uphold the human rights standards that they are pursuing as a source of protection, redress, and self-determination?

7 Conclusion

In a sense, states have always been at a disadvantage when it comes to earning and keeping the loyalty of their citizens. They are usually too large to offer the kind of comfort and moral security often provided by small communities, and at the same time they are incapable, without developing expansionist ambitions, of providing a universal vision of moral order.

The international movement of indigenous peoples attempts to simultaneously provide its members with three levels of moral certitude and social empowerment. It affirms above all local claims of difference, using such concepts as treaty rights, regional autonomy, and self-determination. The struggle for cultural and political affirmation, taking place largely through and within bureaucratic organizations, aims to restore and reinforce ways of life based upon personal ties of kinship, friendship, and obligation. For many individuals and societies, the tarnished mirror of the
recent past cannot reveal the essence of their being, at least not without an additional effort of self-awareness, a return to one's roots, a reconstruction of the self by invoking an earlier, perhaps traumatic, but truth-revealing state of existence. The concept of "indigenous peoples" is in part a tool for clarification of identity through a global assertion of the values of community.

On a second level, indigenous peoples often use the language and symbols of nation-states, not, I have argued, to assert claims of independent statehood, but to clarify for everyone, above all their own citizens, their continuing claims of self-determination, based on the political integrity and autonomy of ancestors that preceded the formation or imposition of nation-states in and around their ancestral territories.

Third, they have embraced the universal vision of human rights as a way of protecting and developing their other sources of identity and power. The consensus-oriented system of human rights law and procedure holds out the promise of a regime of social justice that transcends the barriers of class, gender, race, income, and nationality. Indigenous peoples' organizations appear, from their uses of international law, to subscribe to human rights for their effectiveness in resisting the abuses of states, but there is also in human rights law a source of moral appeal shared with that large part of humanity that seeks the certainties of a transcendent universal ethic, that finds a system of truths so convincing, powerful, and liberating that it must be shared with others, ideally to the point where it is held by all of humanity.

Worldwide, the search for global moral certainty has contributed to the growing energy put into efforts to extend the limits of tolerance within nation-states, to redress gender and racial bias, to resist the centralizing tendencies of states by challenging them to accommodate the interests of distinct ethnic minorities. Among the strongest of such challenges comes from those who feel that as indigenous peoples, as the original occupants of territories later claimed by colonial powers and nation-states, they have distinct rights of citizenship and self-determination. Unlike other forms of antidiscrimination, the indigenous peoples' movement does not strive principally for minority protection or higher standards of equality but seeks to reinforce the primary loyalties within their communities, above all to entrench those loyalties in distinct rights of self-determination. More than most other efforts to extend the reach of tolerance, certainly more than those oriented exclusively toward gender or racial equality, the claims of indigenous peoples would pluralize the correspondence between the nation and the state.

In pursuing its goals of antidiscrimination and self-determination, the indigenous peoples' movement makes use of ideas that facilitate identity formation, ideas developed largely by nonindigenous sympathizers. Colonial domination has sometimes been characterized as a source of oppressive ideas about the colonized, a feature that calls for liberation from imposed identities as much as from power. Images of subject populations possessing a host of stereotypical qualities has become part of an accepted canon of cultural ideas, insidiously received as self-images, from which the colonized draw as a source of self-assessment, self-knowledge, and identity. The indigenous peoples' movement, however, does not often combat imposed identities as sources of oppression but, on the contrary, finds many of its powers of liberation in the ideas of dominant societies. The term "indigenous peoples" has itself become a marker of global identity, associated with mainly positive ideas about cultural wisdom and integrity and with politically significant claims to self-determination. Liberation from the various forms of oppression imposed upon indigenous peoples could not become a political objective until the idea of indigenous peoples had itself gained currency. This occurred through developments in international law, which first saw indigenous peoples as those impoverished, "backward" minority populations most in need of a guiding hand toward "citizenship," or at least more complete participation in national economies and cultures. The idea then shifted, through the increasing participation of indigenous representatives themselves, to a greater emphasis placed on cultural integrity and rights of self-determination that transcend the interests and even the sovereignty of nation-states.

As a global category of human population with a loose definition (or definitions), "indigenous peoples" has come to include an extremely diverse array of societies, including those with attachments to hunting and gathering, shifting agriculture, and pastoral nomadism. Some have been greatly influenced by Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism and so are on the
peripheries of so-called high cultures. Others reject such religions or combine them with “syncretist” attachments to traditions of spirit worship and shamanism. They vary almost as widely as human differentiation will allow in terms of subsistence method, spirituality, marriage patterns, and political organization. That which has united them is above all a category and a process in international law that recognizes their distinctive position of marginality in their relationships with nation-states.

The people of such diverse regions and cultures did not unite under the rubric “indigenous peoples” simply because the concept was available and the technology of communication made it possible to do so; the globalization of this identity was energized by an idea, or set of ideas, about rights and recognition that has come to inhere in the notion of what it is to be or belong to an indigenous people. Indigenous peoples do not just assert the now-familiar arguments associated with multiculturalism: the need for recognition and affirmation of distinct identities and cultures, the right to equal treatment of all citizens of the state regardless of gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, or ethnic affiliation. Recognition of difference for indigenous peoples includes rights that go beyond notions of differences with equality. Indigenous claims are not only multicultural but also multiconstitutional. The indigenous peoples’ movement is founded on a struggle for inherent rights of social membership and identity, for the authority to (re)make the rules that govern conduct, for recognition not only of distinct identity and culture but also of distinct rights. The assertion by indigenous peoples of their rights of self-determination is thus their main point of defense against the assimilation goals of nation-states. Such a strategy is seen by its proponents to hold out an alternative to state political domination and state-centered cultural homogenization. In a sense, indigenous peoples hope to resist assimilation into nation-states by promoting assimilation into themselves.

State resistance to indigenous self-determination as “peoples” in international law has centered upon the possibility that this might bring about a surge of indigenous secessions from nation-states. The specter of indigenous nations within nation-states is one thing, but, it is sometimes asserted, the world community cannot under any circumstances create conditions that would encourage indigenous nations to strive for independent nation-statehood. Surprisingly, such concerns, while still apparently influencing the policy direction of the United Nations, have lost some of their potency. The number of nation-states that recognize indigenous rights of self-determination has progressively increased. There is, it seems, nothing in the values of liberal democracy inherently at odds with the notion of self-governing indigenous peoples, and there is decreased resistance to power sharing with them, especially when developed through constructive arrangements with nation-states.

One issue that continues to trouble some liberal human rights theorists, however, is the extent to which recognition of indigenous rights to self-determination might strengthen illiberal governments. If indigenous peoples’ collective rights are recognized, they, or illiberal states following the same principles, can easily use these rights as a tool of repression, justified on the grounds of relativism and the need to secure rights of distinct cultures over the rights of individuals.

Human rights collectivism is thus a challenge to both human rights liberals and indigenous peoples. The assertion of collective rights readily lends support to the aggrandizing and hegemonic tendencies of illiberal states, states that sometimes control the destinies of those claiming status as indigenous peoples. If collective rights are paramount for self-determining “peoples,” who is to say what collective body best expresses and carries forward the right to culture or the right to development? What use are individual rights, such states might ask, when a nation as a whole is undeveloped and its people undernourished? The welfare of individuals lies in the strength of the state. If any wish to oppose the culture, religion, or prosperity of the state, then individual rights become forfeit; citizens of the state cannot wish for both development and the freedom to stand in its way. Of course, if states claim to be the legitimate vehicles of collective rights, not only individuals but also minority cultures, including indigenous peoples, can be cast in the light of enemies, spoilers, rogues, and rebels.

Thus, if indigenous claims to self-determination are to avoid playing into the hands of despotic governments, they must have individual rights built into them. If a minority people is to claim rights of self-determination under international law, it must commit itself to self-
govern in accordance with human rights standards. This means that indigenous peoples are seeking protection from a system of values and rights that strives, or is likely to strive at some point in the future, to alter or eliminate some of the social practices that are important to the collective identities of some indigenous societies. Human rights do not offer protection of cultural practices that themselves violate individual human rights. Full compliance with human rights norms is in principle inconsistent with some of the cherished features of some indigenous societies: the authority of elders (which can stand in the way of representative democracy), the duty of children (especially as it applies to labor and the “cruelty” that can be found in some rites of passage), and the subservience of women (expressed above all in marriage duties and exclusion from politics). Human rights are at the same time duties. Protection against the state-sponsored eradication of culture and imposition of values can bring with it another form of culture-changing universalism.

Like other creeds, liberalism, including the liberal approach to human rights, has its inherent tensions and inconsistencies. It has faltered in particular when tolerance reaches the limits imposed by intolerant others. Beyond these limits, tolerance sometimes fades into weakness or even complicity with intolerance. Vigorous self-assertion, however, very quickly makes liberalism resemble other impositions of cultural homogenization. Liberalism struggles to find a position somewhere between self-effacing toleration of illiberal cultures and resemblance of them through too-strident evangelism.

This adds both credibility and risk to indigenous peoples' assertion of their rights of self-determination. Making states the exclusive agent responsible for meeting human rights obligations is an invitation to greater state interference in distinct societies. Human rights, applied from above through unequal power relations, thus becomes yet another assimilationist tool, part of the project to make all citizens equal not only in rights but also in the basic ingredients of identity and culture. The self-determination goals of distinct societies offer a way out of state hegemony but leave open the question of how individual rights can be accommodated within assertions of collective values and powers. This becomes a more tangible problem as indigenous societies, in the transitions brought about by technology, bureaucracy, and law, take on new organizational structures and acquire new powers through their interactions and formal arrangements with states and international organizations. Activating the self-determination of indigenous peoples without a baseline of individual rights could in some circumstances become an innovative form of oppression within liberation.

This seems to be far from the minds of indigenous people themselves, for whom the construction of state identities and powers has often created conditions of marginalization and suffering. Indigenous identities are largely built on the foundations of victimization and grievance, invoked through both collective memory and daily experience. Tracing these identities to their sources, we find that those who call themselves indigenous peoples are at the same time those most commonly the targets of untrammeled ethnic and racial hatred, dispossessed of lands and livelihood through coercion, impoverished by exclusion from formal economies, and deprived, by virtue of their “distinct” status, of the rights and benefits of citizenship within states. Their suffering and the collective identities that derive from it come largely from a tendency on the part of states and corporations to remove them from their lands and resources, making it impossible for them to practice their own subsistence methods and other dimensions of culture, and then to deny them new economic opportunities by invoking, directly or indirectly, their attachment to “traditional” practices.

Indigenous identity, sometimes used to designate the distinctiveness of indigenous societies in the constitutional and moral orders of nation-states, carries significant authority and some degree of power, especially when legally articulated. It is largely an outcome of unintentional cultural and political collaboration. The concept “indigenous peoples,” developed principally within Western traditions of scholarship and legal reform, has nurtured the revival of “traditional” identities. It has transcended its symbolic use by acquiring legal authority. It is the focus of widening struggles by increasing numbers of “peoples” for recognition, legitimacy, and validation. It has been taken control of by its living subjects—reverse-engineered, rearticulated, and put to use as a tool of liberation.