



Indigenous

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What is it?

The word “Indigenous” is often used interchangeably with “Fourth World,” “tribal,” and “aboriginal.” Indigenous peoples share certain characteristics: living in relatively small populations; knowing how to live on the land outside the modern industrial infrastructure; having their own language; encoding myriad ties to ancestral land and ecology in myths and stories that make up a complex cosmology; retaining distinctive cultural traditions; and self-identifying as Indigenous. In popular discourse, the term still carries stereotypical connotations of “primitivism” and “backwardness.” Recently those who self-identify as Indigenous have used the term to mean “unconquered,” i.e., proud peoples who have managed to remain themselves despite modernity’s attempts to assimilate them. In the political discourse on rights, Indigenous scholars, cultural workers, and legal advocates continue to contest what counts as knowledge, who gets to set the rules of engagement with (non-Indigenous) others, and who gets to arbitrate competing claims, especially those having to do with resource and territorial disputes.

Who uses the concept?

Scholars in psychology, anthropology, literary and postcolonial studies, and even economics, have been taking a turn toward the Indigenous. International bodies, such as the United Nations, have been working for the recognition of Indigenous peoples’ rights through such mechanisms as the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP), the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (PFII), and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

Intercultural dialogue is about bridging divides across differences, and there is no more crucial divide that needs bridging in our world today than that between the modern industrial world and Indigenous cultures. Understanding the discourse of modernity and its often genocidal assimilation of Indigenous peoples around the globe can shed new light on default cultural understandings.

What work remains?

Indigenous studies as a critical lens has yet to influence the study of intercultural dialogue in a meaningful way. Taking into consideration the epochal shifts from hunting and gathering to settled agriculture and from manual labor to mechanized work with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, and their constitutive impact on human subjectivity (e.g., the invention of linear time, individualism, and private ownership, the constituting of hierarchies, the splitting of mind from body) may help rescue much of the theorizing of identity from the trap of an assumed progressivism that perpetuates ideas of modernity as superior, inevitable and normative.

Resources

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