

## Book Review

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

Ronald Niezen

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Ronald Niezen is a visiting senior researcher in the Institute for Human Rights at Abo Akaemi University of Finland. In his book *The Origins of Indigenism: Human Rights and the Politics of Identity*, Niezen explores critically the rise of a new global Indigenous network in the post-World War II human rights era. By examining the recent origins of the international indigenist movement, Niezen sophisticatedly weaves together social, political, and developmental discourses that demonstrate how divergent groups of Indigenous peoples have created a collective politics of resistance that builds on their commonly shared experiences as colonized and oppressed peoples.

In this informative text, Niezen uses a comparative sociological approach to position indigenism as an emergent form of political identity, activism, and critique. In an effort to develop his theoretical analyses, he explores four central questions: What conditions have enabled a collective international indigenous identity to emerge? What are the common experiences of those diverse groups who identify themselves as indigenous peoples? How do nation states perceive indigenous claims to self-determination? How have human rights discourses become mobilized as a method of rediscovering and redefining indigenous political status and cultural distinctiveness?

Niezen suggests that through the use of strategic international human rights discourses, indigenous communities are now using international courts and global organizations such as the United Nations to reclaim, promote, and protect the traditional rights and responsibilities that accrued to them as the world's first peoples. He argues that the emergence of an international indigenous network is evident in increasingly insurgent calls for social, cultural, and political reforms at micro (state and community) and macro (international) levels.

Micro-level reforms include strengthening community relationships, reasserting individual rights, and negotiating conditions for self-determination in education and the workforce. On the macro level, indigenous networks are challenging definitions of citizenship, problematizing understandings of national culture, exploring rights to self-governance, and asserting traditional controls over land claims and environmental resour-

ces. Based on these analyses, Niezen posits that an increasingly complex and diverse collection of indigenous identities and concerns are globalizing through the formation of politicized international networks that strive to reassert and strengthen traditional familial and cultural bonds while concomitantly emphasizing a return to ancestral knowledge and wisdom. These indigenous networks provide important sites for collective strategies to develop in an attempt to resist nationalistic tendencies to create monolithic cultures that would rather subsume than embrace distinctive indigenous cultures and identities.

For Niezen, indigenism can be viewed as much more than simply a legal or analytical concept, a return to romanticism, or even a politicized international movement. Moreover, he suggests that indigenism should be understood as a multifaceted personal, political, and cultural statement that is necessarily both a local and global phenomenon. To substantiate this thesis, he highlights how indigenous peoples from across the world share contemporary and historical narratives of personal, political, and historical oppressions that expand far beyond geographic or nationalistic borders. He posits that these universal experiences have served as the primary catalyst for the development and formation of international indigenous networks. Although Niezen emphasizes the tremendous importance of this new collective movement, he is also careful to distinguish indigenism from the more sinister and troubling discourse of ethnonationalism. In distinguishing between indigenism and ethnonationalism, Niezen clearly articulates the international indigenous movement as an attempt to create a broader sense of identity and affiliation that transcends cultural, linguistic, and religious categorizations. Instead of seeking to close borders as ethnonationalism often does, indigenism attempts to open them to a vast and varied network of first peoples who share common experiences of marginalization, economic servitude, and sociocultural genocide.

Niezen proposes that any sense of a collective international indigenous community should be understood as a postmodern bricolage of continually shifting micro- and macro-level identities that encompass family, nation, and international affiliation. Membership in this international collective is determined by blood and birth, with identity and experience marked by oral and written testimony and a collective cultural memory of marginalization, discrimination, and dispossession. Strategically, the international indigenous community has resisted a formalized or legalistic definition of the term *indigenous* based on rigid categories of identity, language, or heritage. Instead, the international indigenous community has preferred to conceptualize indigenous identity as a necessarily fluid, relational, and ambiguous term. Niezen suggests that this lack of a formal definition is an astute political and survival strategy. This anti-definitional

approach stems from the real fear that the very definition of an indigenous identity could lead to its ultimate cooptation and recolonization.

Despite attempts to re-fuse the collapsing of indigenous identities into a form of identity politics, the international indigenous community has still successfully managed to define and regulate its membership. International membership is acquired through a process based on group consensus, which is rooted in a commonality of shared experience and oppression. Collectively, this communitarian approach attempts to link diverse groups of indigenous peoples from across the world. Niezen cites specific examples from his own research in indigenous communities in Canada and Africa that share a collective belief in radical democracy that is firmly based in participatory decision-making, commonality of oppression(s), the desire for restorative justice, the right to self-determination, and the quest for self-governance.

Many of these multiple informal networks of indigenous peoples gained increasing strength and cohesiveness in the post-World War II era. Correspondingly, the interest in indigenous networks became a significant source of concern for the newly emerging United Nations. Niezen posits that this new emphasis was significantly influenced by four major postwar concerns. First, the struggle against Fascism and the ensuing lessons learned from World War II weighed heavily on the United Nations' new mandate as an international organization dedicated to preserving peace and human rights. After the war, the United Nations realized that rabid nationalism could lead to unchecked human rights abuses against minorities and indigenous peoples. Subsequently, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948, and later the International Bill of Human Rights was ratified. These two international covenants represented a new era of international human rights that was concerned with protecting the voices of the marginalized and disenfranchised. In 1982 the United Nations created the Working Group on Indigenous Populations, and in 2000 the Working Group was officially recognized as the Permanent United Nations Forum on Indigenous Issues.

The second important international movement witnessed the rapid process of decolonization and the ensuing rise of self-determining nation states as a critical economic, cultural, political, and social movement. This principle of self-determination became the guiding mantra of the postcolonial era. Niezen suggests that decolonization brought forth a new wave of liberalism with a strong human rights agenda that significantly affected international laws. This emerging human rights discourse would later provide an appropriate and timely venue for indigenous claims toward the right of self-determination.

Third, the assimilationist movement that attempted to integrate indigenous peoples into mainstream society through educational reforms (residential schools) and relocation programs (reserves) failed spectacular-

ly. Ironically, this failure helped to unify indigenous peoples into a more cohesive political force that eventually formed the basis for international lobbying efforts. The influence of the United States Civil Rights movement and the ensuing rise of pan-indigenous groups helped the individual experiences of indigenous communities throughout the world to coalesce into a collective voice that focused significant international attention on local human rights violations that were occurring in democratic nation states.

Fourth, the failed assimilationist policies of the 20th century gave rise to a new, educated indigenous middle class that actively took part in and questioned the notions of civil society at the local and international levels. Many of these public intellectuals went on to form non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that would become an influential mechanism that allowed indigenous human rights concerns to enter into the international spotlight.

As the United Nations began to emerge as an international presence and NGOs became more actively involved in political lobbying, many indigenous groups drew international attention to their regional grievances. The rise of globalization and the widening north and south split also significantly influenced and shaped the international indigenous movement. Northern indigenous communities had primarily experienced assimilationist educational policies that provided them with the formal knowledge to engage in international bureaucratic structures and political discourse. Many of the central and southern indigenous communities had their formative experiences shaped by military dictatorships bent on extermination (e.g., Pinochet and Chile).

When indigenous communities are necessarily focused on their own survival, it becomes much more difficult, if not impossible, for them to engage in diplomatic policy negotiations at the state or international level. These divergent experiences created a knowledge gap between indigenous communities of the North and South. Fortunately, as Niezen indicates, this gap is narrowing now that many southern nations are beginning to embrace democratic principles. On the surface these democratic societies would appear at least to make it possible for local indigenous organizations to work more openly and collectively with their national governments and international indigenous communities. However, in everyday practice democratic nation states still perpetuate some of the most horrific abuses against indigenous peoples.

Being careful not to oversimplify the rise of international indigenism as an unproblematic aspect of the neoliberal human rights agenda, Niezen strongly asserts that a critical analysis is needed to explore both the use of liberal discourses that emphasize individualism, along with indigenous discourses that are based on collective rights and responsibilities. For example, he outlines the cases of the Masai and Bedouin as indigenous

peoples who practice female genital mutilation. He questions how these indigenous communities can take part in an international movement when their traditional practices are in violation of human rights discourses. When should human rights be applied universally? How are human rights discourses used as tools for social reform?

As Niezen suggests, "to be a self-determining people involves accepting not only the benefits of human rights but also the responsibilities of human rights obligations" (p. 116). He strongly and passionately argues that cultural relativism cannot be used as a justification for despotism. Tradition can no longer be an excuse for human rights abuses. He suggests that under the present rubric of international human rights discourses, cultural relativism is inconsistent with the pursuit of self-determination. For these reasons, international indigenous networks must not only address issues of identity, language, and culture, but must also call into question human rights abuses perpetuated by their own members. Failure to take up a critique of this radical humanist discourse could result in a dangerous reversal of positions in which the oppressed simply reinscribe dominant power relations and become the oppressors.

These human rights standards are universalist in intention and anti-relativist in orientation and as such are at odds with most forms of cultural relativism. Correspondingly, international human rights standards define and analyze minority groups from philosophical and legal traditions that are foreign to these distinct societies. The dilemma for indigenous leaders who seek to use human rights legislation to legitimize their pursuit of self-determination or collective rights (a form of universalism) lies in the fact that it requires cultural change. In many ways the bureaucratic, written, and legalistic structures of these international communities are antithetical to indigenous cultural beliefs.

Using a Weberian perspective, Niezen provocatively suggests that the unquestioned reliance on using Western bureaucratic structures to advocate for indigenist reforms will ultimately penetrate indigenous societies and in turn work to erode the distinct cultures that these groups are trying to protect (e.g., oral cultures). Despite these real concerns, most indigenous communities still see their survival as depending on the pursuit of self-determination through legalistic (read Western) means. Correspondingly, Niezen rather unproblematically states, "indigenism is therefore a [necessary] political strategy that entails almost as much cultural transition as cultural preservation" (p. 118).

This statement seems counterintuitive to most of Niezen's major arguments that focus on building a postmodern approach that calls for recognition of subjugated knowledge and the creation of oppositional movements. Niezen seems to be resigned to the fact that indigenous communities have little choice but to use Western social, legal, and political constructs to create a space and place for their claims to be heard. Perhaps

he should push this neo-Marxian development discourse to extend its critique to an examination of the actual structures of disavowal that continue to exploit indigenous peoples through the use and abuse of material power relationships. He needs to ground his arguments more in terms of social and economic critique rather than simply as descriptive of a developmental project, because the latter approach rejects or totally ignores a critique of liberal/humanist development theory as a hegemonic form of capitalist discourse.

Niezen is not without hope in his analysis, as he suggests that the goals of this new indigenist movement can still be shaped to mobilize and critique the pursuit of group-specific rights and responsibilities as a major challenge to the traditional liberal discourses that emphasize the doctrine of individualism. Therefore, the necessary challenge focuses on how to use international human rights policies, which center on protecting the individual, to promote the recognition of the collective concerns and rights of indigenous peoples.

At the international level, recognition of the collective rights of indigenous peoples has been restricted to the domain and discretion of nation states. Indigenous communities challenge this limitation and insist that they are nations within nations that have a right to self-determination that has never been relinquished. Many nation states bristle at this claim and fear that the recognition of sovereignty rights will bring about the unmaking of their nation. Niezen highlights how indigenous peoples, understanding how legal documents carry more significance than oral traditions, have sought to make their traditional claims apparent in a language that speaks to policymakers and government officials:

We are sovereign people. We have always governed ourselves, and here is the evidence that we continue to do so. The laws that you make as a state presume to control us, to take away our land, to diminish who we are as a people, but these laws were not made by us. We have our own laws, made by the will of our people. You have made a promise that we should be able to govern ourselves. International law tells us that we should be allowed to govern ourselves. And here is the result of our governance. (pp. 189-190)

This sense of micronationalism (a nation without a state) has resulted in a new politics of resistance that connects local indigenous communities with the ever-expanding outside world through technology, rapid globalization, and increasingly international indigenous networks. These networks are built through the collaboration of indigenous communities, international organizations, non-governmental agencies, and other sympathetic global audiences. These savvy indigenous alliances work to turn the logic of liberal societies against themselves by using the international courts and media to demonstrate how nation states, by victimizing the rights of indigenous peoples, are victimizing the rights of all peoples. This politics of embarrassment and shame can have tremendous political influence as liberal nation states seek to maintain a public persona of inclusion and respect for human rights and cultural differences.

However, Niezen notes that most indigenous communities are not calling for the development of radically new nation states, but rather desire a negotiated peace that results in their special accommodation within nation states. This accommodation would seek to acknowledge existing treaty rights that have historically recognized the indigenous right to self-determination. This sanctioned pluralism allows indigenous peoples to form their own identities and cultures with laws and values that have a basis and meaning in their traditional ways of life.

Niezen suggests that there is little desire to establish indigenous breakaway republics as the ultimate goal of self-determination. Traditional treaties are viewed as symbols of trust and fiduciary relationships between two nation states. From an indigenous perspective, secession would mean a breach of this relationship and an absolution of state governments' legal rights and responsibilities. As many indigenous communities point out, the real fear of granting self-determination is not that indigenous communities will secede and form new nations; rather, nation states are fearful of losing control over indigenous lands and resources. As Niezen suggests, indigenous claims, especially those based in longstanding treaty negotiations, are "not only multicultural but also multiconstitutional" (p. 218).

As a postcolonial project, indigenism is a movement that is grounded in the recovery of place; the authenticity and preservation of tradition, language, and culture; and in the assertion of the rights to self-determination. Niezen views the emergence of an international indigenist movement as a way to visualize a new postcolonial horizon that strives to overcome a legacy of victimization and a history of injustice inflicted on the first peoples of the world.

Although Niezen presents a comprehensive genealogy of the relatively recent rise of indigenism, he fails to critique adequately how this emerging international identity has unquestioningly bought into a globalizing neoliberalist discourse. To a certain extent Niezen's arguments passively position indigenism as an international movement that could easily be interpreted as an attempt to carve out its own niche in an increasingly capitalistic world. Niezen also undermines many of his own critical arguments by failing to consider how indigenism may be problematically positioned as a new form of globalized and hegemonic identity politics that dangerously reifies an indigenous and non-indigenous binary.

Other significant absences include Niezen's failure to situate himself more explicitly in his writings. Although he does share some of his own experiences as an international indigenous advocate, he leaves the reader to question whether he is even a member of the indigenous communities for which he advocates. With a book that foregrounds the importance of identity and development, Niezen's failure to analyze his own situatedness is a major shortcoming.

Another significant drawback is Niezen's almost exclusive focus on the experiences of the indigenous peoples of Canada and Africa. This emphasis may lead a novice reader to conclude that indigenous concerns are limited to these relatively distinct international populations. More consideration should be given to the truly global nature of the indigenist movement that Niezen so passionately advocates.

Despite these limitations, this text will be useful to readers who are interested in a comparative sociological approach that is grounded in the discourses of liberal humanism, radical democracy, international development, and cultural politics. In addition, Niezen's text also provides for significant comparative insights into a variety of indigenous movements that have attempted to challenge economic, political, and cultural dominations while foregrounding their varying and often contradictory social logics. Overall, this text succeeds in conceptualizing a significant and strategic vehicle for those indigenous communities that wish to develop their own international agendas that advocate for a delicate balancing of collective and individual rights discourses in the age of increasing globalization.