

*Response to Alexander Dawson's  
Review of Invisible Indigenes: the  
Politics of Nonrecognition.  
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ALEXANDER DAWSON in his review of my book, *Invisible Indigenes: the Politics of Nonrecognition*, is certainly correct that a book dealing with Indigenous peoples around the globe opens the author to critiques by regional scholars. That's to be expected. The review, however, doesn't convey much about my arguments to readers of *BC Studies*. I'll try to briefly do that. Over the last thirty years I have been involved in various ways with Indigenous communities in both the US and Canada that lack formal recognition by the nation-state. In both countries I found that the resulting political and practical difficulties for

the communities were compounded by limited, ill-considered national discourses which failed to connect to larger world-scale issues. Meanwhile, over the last few decades many Indigenous communities around the world have benefited from examining the similarities and dissimilarities in the ways national governments treat them and in Indigenous responses to the state. They are doing this in settings such as the Permanent Forum On Indigenous Issues in the UN and in local-level community exchanges. However, no one prior to the publication of my book had examined in detail the issue of nonrecognized Indigenous peoples from a global perspective.

Dawson claims in his review that I privilege oral histories over “historical empiricism” (his words), but I emphatically do not. I went to considerable effort to carefully describe limitations to a number of approaches (relational, geographic, cultural, temporal, and others) to defining indigenes, and, consequently, how these leave out particular groups. His discussion overlooks the devastating emotive impact of nonrecognition on communities where I have worked, and elsewhere, a circumstance which is not amenable to critique by historians or anyone else. However, I do not advance the anger and exhaustion of members of nonrecognized communities as constituting any sort of proof of indigeneity. In fact, I specifically reject the idea of self-identification as sufficient evidence.

Further, he suggests that in my critiques of “traditional methods of determining indigenesness” I fail to recognize the limitations of my own approach. But I specifically reject having an answer to the thorny question of how to determine what communities

are indigenous. Instead, I point out that nonrecognized communities have in many cases suffered needlessly and this ought to be borne in mind when subjecting them to onerous and poorly designed review processes or public policies. In addition, I suggest that prototype theory be considered – that various Indigenous communities might belong to the same category without characteristics in common. Indigenous people don’t necessarily know a great deal about medicinal plants, dress differently than others, or participate in localized, culturally specific ritual practices, for example, and there are no trait lists which can solve the question of indigenesness.

In any case, I’m troubled by Dawson’s reference to “traditional” methods of determining indigeneity. This is really the rub – states in many places around the world have invented interesting ways to determine who counts as Indigenous people and communities and thereby to overlook various responsibilities and legal entitlements. In Malaysia, for example, faced with wealthy and politically powerful Chinese and Indian minorities, the state gave special rights and privileges to Malays as the definitive people who set up the first effective governments. This novel approach enabled the Malays to avoid the awkward fact that the Orang Asli (a term for a composite group) migrated to the area before the Malay, and as such constitute a category of people that undermines the Malays’ claim to be the indigenous people of the Malay Peninsula. Meanwhile, the unrecognized Orang Asli, reclassified as Malay as they come to speak Malay or practice Islam while under enormous pressure from the state to do so, face assimilation. Such state practices are not “traditional,” a term which naturalizes and obscures the highly

politicized nature of state relations with Indigenous peoples. Scholars such as Patrick Morris, in his 1988 piece, "Termination by Accounts," have observed that bureaucrats erase Indigenous administratively.<sup>1</sup> In the US, the development of blood quantum criteria for membership is one such example; people who fail to pass a quantum test simply become ineligible for services. There's nothing traditional about the concept of blood quantum and it's easy to point specifically to the moment when US policy shifted in this direction.

Dawson notes that some of the "underlying assumptions about what it means to be an indigene in North America do not translate well from here to other places." He's right about this, which is why I wrote in some detail on this question. The emergent international discourse of indigeneity is the only game in town, the only way for many communities to use the slowly building international agreement about how Indigenous communities ought to be treated in order to rearrange their relations with the state. Dawson points to the fact that simple dichotomies, presumably such as Indigenous/non-Indigenous, don't describe complex societies such as Chile, Guatemala

and Venezuela particularly well. But all societies are complex and these terms don't describe the situation very well anywhere. Inter-marriage, shifting places of residence, urbanization, changing cultural practices and other factors all make examining indigeneity difficult. My book serves to make these problems apparent and to point out who are the losers in the international struggle over indigeneity. There are no hard data on the number of Indigenous people worldwide precisely because of the conceptual difficulties with the term.

Finally, Dawson claims that I see sinister motives on the part of states. He's right here, too. I am suggesting states are guilty of malevolence. There is such a broad record of manipulation of Indigenous peoples world wide that it's a wonder he's missed this. This isn't the whole story, either. Many governments have acted in good faith and out of good motives, at least part of the time, but often with poor outcomes as a result of limited understanding of Indigenous communities' circumstances. The many nonrecognized indigenous communities around the world largely remain under the radar and their circumstances call for some scholarly attention.

<sup>1</sup> Morris, Patrick C. 1988. "Termination by Accountants: The Reagan Indian Policy." *Policy Studies Journal* 16 (4): 731-50.