Introduction: historical and intellectual development of indigeneity in the contexts of colonialism and post-colonialism

‘Indigenous identity’ is paradoxical. On the one hand, it refers to the ancient, distinctive, localised identities and ways of life of typically small, ‘traditional’, pre-industrial cultural groups closely tied to (or, rather, intertwined as identities with) lands occupied since ‘time immemorial’. On the other hand, it also refers to a very modern, global political movement that has emerged through recent globalising phenomena including the development of international human rights fora, frameworks and discourses. Indigenous representatives claim that indigenous cultures are ‘oral cultures’ and that oral traditions are still central to their identities and forms of cultural organisation and transmission. And yet, since the 1990s indigenous groups have become a major presence on the Internet, which has become a textual, electronic vehicle for indigenous resurgence, for survival and revival of language and traditions (Niezen 2005). Indigenous people have also made extensive use of the research and writings of ethnographers and anthropologists to reconstruct and reinvent their traditions in the present.

Indigenous identity also has its roots in earlier forms of globalisation, namely imperialism and colonialism, without which the concept of indigeneity, and the commonality of culture and experience it implies, would not exist. For example, before Australia was colonised by the British in 1788, there were hundreds or thousands (depending how they are categorised) of small hunter-gatherer, nomadic named populations but there were no Aborigines, or indigenous peoples as such. This united category is inseparable from colonialism. Indigenous identity, therefore, draws its sustenance from notions of historical cultural continuity and survival against the odds, but is also modern; it is at once local and global, expressed in thousands of distinct peoples making up a homogenous category of ‘indigenous peoples’.

The use of the term ‘indigenous’ to describe people and identities is historically recent, dating from the mid-twentieth century when the International Labour Organisation (ILO) sought to highlight and defend the labour and other rights of ‘indigenous populations’, most notably in the 1953 report Indigenous Peoples: Living and Working Conditions of Aboriginal Populations in Independent Countries, and in the 1957 International Labour Organisation Convention (No. 107)
Concerning the Protection and Integration of Indigenous and Other Tribal and Semi-Tribal Populations in Independent Countries. Prior to that, from the seventeenth century onward, ‘indigenous’ was more typically used as an adjective to describe the plants and livestock native to a particular place (Niezen 2005: 539). Beginning in the 1950s, and especially since the 1980s, it has become the widely accepted designation for a diverse set of peoples organised in a global political movement with a distinct form of identity claims.

Of course, discussions of the people now called ‘indigenous’ date back much further, including the accounts given by European explorers of the ‘savages’ or ‘natives’ they met in the ‘uncivilised’ regions of the world. Later, ethnographers and anthropologists wrote of such peoples under the categories of ‘tribes’, ‘primitives’, ‘savages’ or ‘aborigines’. One of the most famous early European attempts to protect the interests of such peoples was the Aborigines’ Protection Society, formed in 1837 by British humanitarians as an international society focused on protecting the rights of colonised ‘natives’. The peoples now called ‘indigenous’ fought for their rights to land and resources in frontier struggles in earlier centuries long before they came to imagine themselves as ‘indigenous’. Then, they named themselves by tribal or band names, which many groups still use up to the present day. In countries such as the US and Canada that came to treaty arrangements with some tribes, they were officially described as ‘Domestic Dependent Nations’ or ‘First Nations’ respectively.

Indigenous identities and claims are inextricably bound up with the long period of colonisation from the late fifteenth century ‘discovery’ of the Americas, through to the 1950s that saw the beginning of the period when decolonisation movements swept across the world. While decolonisation meant that formerly colonised peoples gained their independence and freedom from colonising powers, indigenous peoples were those left behind in states where they (with some exceptions) became minorities encompassed by surrounding societies and dominated by other more powerful ethnic groups and nations. This occurred also in newly decolonised, independent states such as India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Bangladesh where indigenous minorities would later make their own indigenous claims to land and resources, and for recognition of culture and identity against dominating nation-states. Indigenous peoples are now said to exist in most parts of the world, as more than four thousand distinct cultures making up over 300 million in population, according to much-quoted estimates (Niezen 2003: xii). They vary from tiny, only recently officially recognised populations such as the Ainu in Japan, to more politically visible but still proportionately small minority populations of Native Americans and Inuit and Cree in the US and Canada, Saami in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia, and Maori in New Zealand, to large, sometimes majority, indigenous populations in some parts of Latin America, such as in Bolivia, Guatemala, Ecuador and Mexico, and majority indigenous populations in Fiji and Greenland.

Post-colonial, a political term characterising those nations that have thrown off the yoke of colonialism, is only tenuously applicable to indigenous peoples and their contemporary situations. At best, indigenous peoples experience degrees of de-colonisation. Often, they are struggling and surviving as dominated and economically depressed peoples in white settler societies. Indigenous peoples frequently reject the idea that they exist in a post-colonial state, arguing, rather, that they continue to experience the colonial conditions that have long threatened their identities, and their capacities to live decent and culturally ‘authentic’ lives (see Alfred and Corntassel 2005). Their battle against colonialism continues, even as some of them have successfully challenged regimes of assimilation, and gained some rights to land, cultural autonomy, self-government and self-determination. As indigenous writers Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel (2005: 601) argue, colonialism is a continuing, developing regime of domination, that indigenous people must continue to resist:
we live in an era of postmodern imperialism and manipulations by shape-shifting colonial powers; the instruments of domination are evolving and inventing new methods to erase Indigenous histories and senses of place. Therefore, ‘globalisation’ in Indigenous eyes reflects a deepening, hastening and stretching of an already-existing empire. Living within such political and cultural contexts, it is remembering ceremony, returning to homelands and liberation from the myths of colonialism that are the decolonising imperatives.

*Post-colonialism*, a doctrine and movement that has its origins in the work of anti-colonial writers including Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire and later Edward Said, has developed as a doctrine and movement largely spearheaded in the West by intellectuals from the Indian subcontinent, such as Gayatri Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha. Some of its arguments, strategies and aims, in particular allowing the ‘subaltern’ to speak beyond colonialism, are of relevance to indigenous peoples, although they and their plights have perhaps been sidelined in postcolonial debates in favour of peoples belonging to former colonies, now independent postcolonial nations. Nevertheless, as I show later, Said’s ‘Orientalism’ critique has been taken up and refashioned as a critique of ‘Aboriginalism’ by indigenous and non-indigenous intellectuals.

One way to think about the peculiarity of ‘indigeneity’ as an identity phenomenon is to compare it with usages of ethnicity and ethnic group. As Ronald Niezen points out, Serbs do not typically refer to themselves as ‘ethnic’ Serbs (and thus tying them to a more encompassing ‘ethnic’ category), while people from distinct indigenous cultures will often refer to themselves not just by their specific name (i.e. Cree, Inuit, Aranda, Maori, etc.) but also as ‘indigenous’, and wear the label with a sense of pride. Where ‘ethnicity’ is an abstract category, ‘indigenous’ is a concrete identity (Niezen 2003: 3). Niezen uses the term ‘indigenism’ to capture the global character of indigenous identity.

Niezen (2003) has also argued that what makes indigenous identity claims unique, distinguishing them for example from ethnonationalist claims, is their grounding in international networks. Indigenous peoples throughout the world make use of a global indigenous rights movement to make what are often very localised claims about identity, cultural rights and land and control of natural resources. Indeed, what is unique about the indigenous movement is the extent to which it is organised though and supported by a developing United Nations framework and set of rights instruments. The early role of the ILO has already been mentioned, and to this can be added the work of committees and forums including non-government organisations (NGOs) and those organised through the United Nations, including the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (1962–), the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations, formed in 1982 and later replaced by the United Nations Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous People (2008–), in addition to other important forums such as the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (2000–), the United Nations Human Rights Council (2006–), and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1987–).

On Thursday, 13 September 2007 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the ‘United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples’ by a majority of 144 states, with four voting against (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the US) and eleven abstaining. Australia later reversed its position and accepted the declaration. This was the culmination of more than two decades of work by the United Nations Working Party on Indigenous Populations, and more than a decade after the release of the finalised draft in 1993. It promotes a comprehensive rights regime covering economic, cultural and language rights, and political rights including the right to self-governance and self-determination. The right of self-determination was one of its most controversial aspects and the major stumbling block for those countries that voted against it, who argued that it promoted separatism (despite the clear statement in Article 46 that none
Many scholars date the contemporary resurgence of indigenous identities and claims to the 1960s, when resource extraction and economic modernisation impinged dramatically on the ways of life of indigenous peoples who had, till then, managed to survive at the fringes of capitalist societies, and when social movements for change, including the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, inspired indigenous peoples to agitate in new ways and to rethink their identities. The ‘Red Power Movement’ in the US in the late 1960s, led by figures such as Lakota author, activist and director of the National Congress of American Indians Vine Deloria Jr. (1933–2005), emphasised pan-Indian identity, and was given momentum by the 1969 occupation by Native American activists of a disused federal prison on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay. The attempt in the late 1960s by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau to revoke Indian Status, along with infrastructure developments such as hydroelectric schemes and the damming of waterways traditionally used for fishing and hunting, are cited as causes of Canadian indigenous resurgence. In some parts of Latin America, it is argued, indigenous identity-politics emerged as late as the 1990s in the context of the collapse of communism (which fragmented socialist oppositions), the embrace of neoliberalism by governments and the collapse of traditional corporatist political pacts between peasants and the state (Jung 2003; Yashar 1998). In effect, peasants became indigenes as the category of peasant became politically redundant and as the category indigenous was gaining momentum at the level of international politics. After Mexico ratified ILO Convention 169 that called for the protection of indigenous cultural rights and rights to self-government in 1990, indigenous identity had a new salience in domestic Mexican politics as peoples reorganised as ‘indigenous’ could appeal to international forums over failures of the Mexican state to abide by the Convention’s principles (Jung 2003).

This later phase of indigenous identity-politics might be best characterised as a reiteration in the contemporary period of much longer and continuous struggles. These include: the frontier wars of many countries dating back to the fifteenth century; the treaty arrangements in the US, Canada and New Zealand during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; struggles for Aboriginal rights (mainly equal citizenship, but with important specific claims over traditional lands) from the 1920s in Australia, including the failed effort of Yorta Yorta elder William Cooper to petition King George V on behalf of Australia’s Aborigines for rights including Aboriginal representation in the federal parliament; and international lobbying such as the failed attempt by Levi General Deskaheh, representing groups of Canada’s indigenous peoples, to get a hearing concerning a dispute with Canada over tribal self-government, at the League of Nations in the 1920s (Niezen 2003: 31–6).

Today indigenous identity is classified in official statements and by indigenous peoples themselves with remarkable uniformity across the world (for a useful discussion, see Corntassel 2003). It is often couched in defensive terms, and always with reference to historical processes of invasion and colonisation. It includes a claim of historical continuity with pre-contact peoples existing in particular places since ‘time immemorial’, an assertion of distinct culture and tradition and sometimes language that is still being passed down through the generations, claims about distinct economic and political existence, and usually some reference to self-identification. Some of this is captured by the attempt to define indigeneity for the United Nations by Jose R. Martinez Cobo, the Special Rapporteur for the Sub-committee to study the problem of discrimination against indigenous populations:

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
Indigenous identities

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.

(Cobo 1987: 48)

All such definitions are, however, provisional and cannot capture all groups in the world that consider themselves to be indigenous (Kingsbury 1998). To point to just one example, indigenous Fijians, who slightly outnumber non-indigenous Fijians (such as those of Indian immigrant descent), are the politically and culturally dominant group in Fiji.

Major claims and developments of the field, and key contributions

As noted earlier, accounts of indigenous peoples appeared in the diaries, notes and memoirs written by European explorers, ethnographers and anthropologists. Indigenous peoples, as exemplars of particular ways of life, played an important role in the development of explanations of different types of society, and in particular played a role as the ‘other’ in understandings of what made Western civilisation distinct. Indigenous peoples like the so-called ‘Hottentots’ of southwestern Africa (now known as Khoikhoi) and the Aborigines of Australia played a role in the development of racial classifications, and in anthropological evolutionism in the nineteenth century. In these instances, indigenous people were typically seen as residing at the bottom of the racial scale, sometimes forming the link between humans and animals, or representing the ‘backward’, early stage of societal evolution.

Among sociologists, Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) famously made use of ethnographic and anthropological studies of indigenous peoples such as North American Indians (the Iroquois) and Australian Aborigines (Kamilaroi, Kurnai, Arunta, etc.) in both The Division of Labour in Society (1893) and The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life (1912). Durkheim used such accounts of tribal peoples to develop his concept of ‘mechanical solidarity’, involving solidary bonds based on sameness and minimal role differentiation and distinguished from modern, ‘organic solidarity’ based on the division of labour; and he returned to them to make major claims about the role of religion in society, especially through his use of the example of totemism (based on accounts of Australian Aborigines) to explain the distinction between the sacred and the profane. The anthropologist Robert Redfield (1897–1958) used his understanding of indigenous Mexican life and culture together with accounts of other indigenous peoples to construct his influential notion of the ‘folk society’, and to explain societal and cultural change along a ‘Folk-Urban Continuum’. Redfield described folk society as small in scale, with intimate relations between all members and a characteristically intense sense of we-ness and group belonging. It was self-referential and isolated from other groups and their influences. These were primarily oral cultures, non-historical and regulated by tradition and ritual, with limited role-differentiation and a simple division of labour. Folk societies used primitive forms of technology, were self-sufficient, subsistence societies characterised by highly personalised rather than abstract relations. Folk society and the ‘Rural-Urban Continuum’ were highly influential concepts and ways of understanding change in the twentieth century, including among urban and rural sociologists, and in what became the sub-discipline of ‘community studies’.

Anthropologists have played key historical and contemporary roles in the development of indigenous studies. Spencer and Gillen’s Native Tribes of Central Australia (1899) reverberated among social scientists and philosophers in Europe’s metropolitan centres, as did Bronislaw
Malinowski’s studies of the Kula of the Trobriand Islands. In his hugely influential *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), based on his intensive method of participant observation to get at the meaning of action, ritual and custom through everyday life, Malinowski made his famous attempt to inhabit the ‘native point of view’. Well-known contemporary anthropologists such as David Maybury-Lewis have highlighted the differential plight of indigenous peoples in different parts of the world. Robert Paine did pioneering anthropological studies of the Saami of northern Europe from the 1950s onward, wrote important studies of nomadic life in the world’s northern regions, and critiqued ‘welfare colonialism’ in the ‘White Arctic’. Anthropologists have also often been in the frontline as advocates for indigenous rights, articulating indigenous claims against dominating states and explaining and defending indigenous world-views to wider publics. And it is anthropologists, often collaborating with and supporting indigenous claimants, who governments and courts have often relied on for expert opinion about indigenous beliefs, traditions and traditional land connections when assessing indigenous rights to land and to the protection of sacred places and traditional heritage.

Important earlier works by historians, anthropologists and sociologists devoted to analysing the history and fate of indigenous people have challenged assumptions about the character of indigenous people; for example, emphasising that they were not ‘timeless’, unchanging peoples belonging to the pre-history of humanity or at an early stage of social evolution. These include anthropologist and historian Edward H. Spicer’s pioneering book *Cycles of Conquest: The Impact of Spain, Mexico and the United States on the Indians of the South West, 1533–1960*, first published in 1962. Spicer set out in this major study to explain culture change among Native Americans as a result of colonial conquest, and in doing so showed the agency and adaptive responses of these peoples over 500 years. He described Native Americans as ‘enduring peoples’ with a particular sense of identity based on three characteristics – relationship to land, common spiritual bond, and language use – and his conception was later influential among indigenous scholars (Crottatse 2003: 91). Eric Wolf in *Europe and the People Without History* (1982) argued against the notion that ethnographers and anthropologists studying ‘primitives’ were studying ‘historyless’ people. Since the beginnings of European expansion from 1400 onward, all peoples across the globe were increasingly and thoroughly interconnected through complex webs of interaction forming a ‘common world’:

> These changes affected not only the peoples singled out as the carriers of ‘real’ history but also the populations anthropologists have called ‘primitives’ and have often studied as pristine survivals from a timeless past. The global processes set in motion by European expansion constitute their history as well. There are thus no ‘contemporary ancestors’, no people without history, no peoples – to use Lévi-Strauss’s phrase – whose histories have remained ‘cold’.

*(Wolf 1982: 385)*

Wolf’s extended discussion (ibid.: ch. 6) of the impact of the European-controlled fur trade, from the seventeenth century onward, on the economic, political and social relations of various North American Indians, including transformations of the operations and meanings of kinship relations, convincingly illustrates the point.

More recently, historian and critic of anthropology James Clifford in *The Predicament of Culture* (1988) has examined the complexity of indigenous identity through his study of the Aboriginal land claims of the Mashpee in Cape Cod, and used the example of indigenous people to reflect on the new uncertainties of post-colonial realities and complexities of all identities as everyone, including indigenous peoples, gets swept up in the movement of modernity, albeit
Indigenous identities

in their own unique ways. Identity becomes always mixed, hybrid, a play of homogenising and differentiating elements. He rejects what he calls the Western regime of time-consciousness that relegates indigenous culture to a historical past:

Throughout the world indigenous populations have had to reckon with the forces of ‘progress’ and ‘national’ unification. The results have been both destructive and inventive. Many traditions, languages, cosmologies, and values are lost, some literally murdered; but much has simultaneously been invented and revived in complex, oppositional contexts.

(Clifford 1988: 16)

Clifford (ibid.: 284) points to the unsettling nature of contemporary indigenous identity and land claims for the colonising West, as powerful ‘impure’ natives upset the old images of powerless, forlorn, vanishing though ‘authentic’ Indian victims living in museum-like conditions, and assert their indigenous status to do ‘non-traditional’ things.

In recent decades anthropologists have been accused of paternalism in relation to the ‘native’ and ‘tribal’ people they have studied. In anti-colonial and post-colonial critiques (some from within the discipline of anthropology itself), anthropologists have been criticised for imposing their own Eurocentric views on others, and of speaking for ‘natives’ under the misguided presumption that they, as non-indigenous observers, could ever really inhabit, understand or articulate indigenous views and voices. In the last few decades some in the discipline have attempted to reorganise it in response to critiques of its being complicit with colonialism. Notable figures include Renato Rosaldo in Culture and Truth (1989) who stressed the entanglement of anthropologists with the colonial enterprise, and Johannes Fabian who in Time and the Other (1983) showed how anthropological writing operates through a structure and politics of time that obscures the ‘coevalness’ of anthropologists and their ‘tribal’ or ‘primitive’ informants. Vincent Crapanzano has championed the development of a ‘dialogic’ anthropology highlighting the role played by anthropologists in constructing ethnographic encounters, and emphasising the way that anthropologists themselves construct meaning through writing their ethnographies, rather than simply report on ‘native’ meaning systems as revealed to them, given expression in works such as Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan (1980).

Along with other non-indigenous writers, opinion-makers and government officials, anthropologists have sometimes been accused of participating in the construction of ‘Aboriginalism’, that at once distorts indigenous identities and renders them more amenable to domination by non-indigenous society. It is here that the discourse of post-colonialism has its most explicit influence in shaping the critique of both indigenous and non-indigenous scholars in relation to indigenous identity claims. The critique of Aboriginalism – which draws on Edward Said’s notion of ‘Orientalism’ – involves the idea that settler states and their ideological workers (politicians, bureaucrats, religious officials and missionaries, intellectuals, social commentators, artists and writers, etc.) create and impose a compliant ‘Aboriginal’ identity that can be negotiated with and ruled (see for example Alfred and Corntassel 2005). The state decides who is and is not Aboriginal, and uses these categorisations to decide what rights will be granted and/or denied to indigenous people. Indigenous peoples are coerced in the process, sometimes collaborating with states and courts to deny the existence of other indigenous groups, or to deny the validity of certain indigenous beliefs, traditions and claims (Weaver 2001). More broadly, Aboriginalism includes coercive, often romanticised academic constructions of the indigenous other, historically and in the present, as well as popular understandings of indigenous peoples evident in everyday life (for example stereotypes, stories and images passed down as folklore, local history), films, television, fiction and art.
Aboriginalism is counterposed with the more authentic identities that can only be known and expressed by indigenous peoples themselves. For example, Hilary Weaver, an indigenous Lakota intellectual, in a paper reflecting on the nature of indigenous identity and various measures to assess it, finally asserts that ‘most attempts to measure identity are of questionable adequacy and accuracy’ and quotes approvingly another author, N.C. Peroff who states that:

Indianness means different things to different people. And, of course, at the most elementary level, Indianness is something only experienced by people who are Indians. It is how Indians think about themselves and is internal, intangible, and metaphysical. From this perspective, studying Indianness is like trying to study the innermost mysteries of the human mind itself.

(quoted in Weaver 2001: 249)

Indigenous people, she argues, must decolonise their own minds to rid themselves of the contaminating images and understanding of the indigene or the native imposed by colonialism.

Indigenous identity-politics thus frequently involves efforts to renegotiate understandings of identity, to resist colonialisit imposition of identities, and to free indigenous peoples to recapture their authentic indigenous self-identities and world-views. In recent work from Australian indigenous scholars such as Aileen Moreton-Robinson, ‘Aboriginalism’ has been critiqued within a framework of whiteness studies. She has argued that ‘whiteness’ as an ‘invisible norm’ has contributed to the ‘orientalisation’ of Australian Aborigines, and she asserts the epistemological incommensurability between Aboriginal knowledge and a ‘white’ knowledge that assumes its universality (Moreton-Robinson 2004).

The growing role of indigenous intellectuals, leaders and activists in this critique has been another important development. Since the 1960s indigenous scholars, writers and activists themselves have made important contributions to an elaboration and defence of indigenous identity and culture as an act of resistance to colonialism and the claims of non-indigenous scholars about the backwardness of indigenous cultures. Pioneering works include N. Scott Momaday’s Pulitzer prize-winning novel *House Made of Dawn* (1968) that chronicled modern Indian life on reservations, Vine Deloria Jr.’s *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969) (discussed with his other work below), and *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality* (1974) co-authored by George Manuel (1921–89), Chief of the National Indian Brotherhood and Assembly of First Nations, a major work articulating and explaining a Canadian Indian, and indigenous, world-view. Manuel, of Canada’s Shuswap people, launched the term ‘Fourth World’ to distinguish the situation and world-view of indigenous peoples across the world, from that of the American dominated First World, the Soviet dominated Second World and the underdeveloped Third World, a battleground for influence between the US and the Soviet Union and their allies. Manuel rejected the applicability to the Fourth World of the idea of underdevelopment and the need for ‘modernisation’ that dominated thinking about the Third World. Indigenous peoples had their own unique contributions to make in the contemporary world, and their cultures and identities were not backward or relics of the past. Fourth World peoples would find their own ways to self-determination, without necessarily modelling themselves on nation-states. *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality* also contained an important critique of the impact of colonialism in undermining the confidence of indigenous peoples in their capacity for, and right to, self-government. Apart from elaborating on the meaning of the Fourth World of indigenous peoples, George Manuel was also one of the founding members of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples in 1975, serving as its president till 1981 (Hall 2003: ch. 3).
‘The Fourth World’ became an important global movement, drawing in anthropologists and ethnographers including Robert Paine, and the geographer and promoter of indigenous rights across the world Bernard Q. Nietschmann. Nietschmann (1994) argued that ‘The Fourth World’ was made up of more than five thousand ancient, authentic (including indigenous) nations captured and dominated by 168 historically recent ‘artificial’ states that were the ‘outgrowth of European kingdoms, overseas colonialism, and the division of large colonial empires into smaller and smaller neo-colonial pieces’ (ibid.: 227), and that this situation was a major cause of ‘ethnocide’ and ‘ecocide’ throughout the world. The survival and diversity of nations, including indigenous nations, was essential to bio-diversity and the survival of the planet. ‘Because most nation peoples depend upon local biological resources that occur within their historical, traditional territories’, Nietschmann (ibid.: 231) argued, ‘they have evolved lifestyles generally adapted to sustaining environments and conserving biological diversity.’ Giving greater self-determination to authentic nations, such as indigenous peoples who knew how to preserve their environments, as opposed to artificial states bent on environmental exploitation, was the only way to ensure environmental sustainability.

Within the developing field of indigenous scholarship several important characteristic themes and arguments have emerged. The anti-colonial critique is central, as is the emphasis on survival against the odds, and the assertion of the right to self-determination. The rootedness of indigenous identity in ancient law, tradition and land is frequently emphasised, though this does not mean that tradition cannot alter and change across time, or that indigenous people cannot adopt more ‘modern’ beliefs, lifestyles and practices. However, these negotiations between tradition and modernity, between indigenous belief systems or religion and ‘Western’ beliefs and religion can be fraught, with accusations by some indigenous people that others are not true indigenes because, for example, they have adopted Christianity (see Weaver 2001). Some assert the superiority of indigeneity as an environmentally sustainable form of culture, and as more spiritually rich than Western, industrialised culture – a source of the appeal of indigenous world-views to environmentalists and ‘New-Age’ thinkers and followers. It is articulated as a more holistic, authentic identity and culture, intertwined with nature and infused with a spirituality and wisdom lacking in the West. The ‘Cartesian self’ of the West, with its opposition between mind and matter, is contrasted with a more organic, spiritual indigenous self.

Vine Deloria Jr., mentioned earlier, was a historian and political activist who did much to articulate an indigenous world-view along the above lines. In his classic and popular first book, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, first published in 1969, Deloria Jr. excoriated white America for its treatment of American Indians, especially the abrogation of treaties by American governments, and also critiqued white civilisation more generally. He called for the teaching of Indian traditions to young Native Americans, the re-establishment of Indian religion, for forms of cultural separation from mainstream America, and for political separation of Indians from the American state. He encouraged the strengthening of reservation communities, tribalism, and a form of Indian nationalism among the majority of Indians who lived in urban areas. Already in this first major work, Deloria Jr. was arguing that Native Americans, as indigenous peoples, had a unique world-view and way of living that was in important ways superior to Western civilisation, and that in fact much of what went under the latter was destructive in the Americas. This book was important in asserting the survival of Native Americans in contemporary America, and for proclaiming that they would now speak for themselves rather than accept being spoken about by non-indigenous experts and government officials. The book also included a powerful – and typically sharp and witty – critique of Christian missionaries and anthropologists.

In *God is Red*, first published in 1972, Deloria Jr. set out to explain and defend the Native American world-view as a valid perspective incommensurable with much of Western science.
Anthony Moran

and Western religion, and as a far more deeply spiritual way of life more attuned with ‘mother
earth’. In the second edition of God is Red, published in 1992, Deloria Jr. created a dichotomy
between so-called ‘natural’ peoples, such as Native Americans and indigenous people across the
world, and those ‘hybrid’ peoples of the Islamic and Judeo-Christian civilisations who lived lives
separated from nature. Deloria Jr. challenged the very metaphysical bases of Western thought,
especially in works such as The Metaphysics of Modern Existence (1979), Red Earth, White Lies
(1997) and the collection of his essays Spirit and Reason (1999). These works called for a deeper,
truer multiculturalism through inhabiting indigenous ways of thinking. In Red Earth, White Lies
(1997: 3) Deloria Jr. suggested that much of what the West had brought to the Americas should
be rejected:

Our present view of government, our avoidance of allegiance to high spiritual powers, and
our exclusively scientific understanding of our world will continue to guide our thoughts
and activities in the future and bring us to a complete collapse unless we achieve more ma-
ture understanding of our planet, its history, and the rest of the universe. Much of Western
science must go, all of Western religion should go, and if we are in any way successful of
ridding ourselves of these burdens, we will find that we can fundamentally change govern-
ment so that it will function more sensibly and enable us to solve our problems.

Deloria Jr. asserted that Native American stories and explanations, including those about human
and geological creation, were not simply symbolically or mythically true, but factually true in
the way in which we believe scientific facts to be true. Western claims of scientific objectivity
were spurious, and the refusal to accept the validity of other, non-Western knowledges unless
they concurred with scientific arguments and claims was, according to Deloria Jr., inspired by
colonialism and racism (Deloria Jr. 1997: ch. 2). Together with its critique and dismissal of
much of Western science, including scientific claims about geological transformations providing
a land bridge across the Bering Strait upon which indigenous peoples ‘migrated’ to America, the
book had a trenchant critique of Christianity, seen as often the vehicle and guiding hand in the
destruction of non-Western peoples, and operating on the destructive view that the earth was
evil (Deloria Jr. 1997: 9).

Apart from the work of indigenous people themselves, there have also been important de-
velopments among non-indigenous intellectuals seeking to account for the nature of indigenous
politics and identity claims through theories that combine a constructivist approach with no-
tions of identity fluidity, political mobilisation and political opportunity. Some of the most
innovative work along these lines has emerged in studies by anthropologists of Latin American
indigenous struggles.

For example, the anthropologist Jan Hoffman French (2004) explains how in the 1970s a
group of peasant sharecroppers in northeastern Brazil, of mixed Portuguese, indigenous, but
mainly African descent ‘without indigenous languages or cultural practices’ (French 2004: 671),
came to distinguish themselves from their neighbours and relatives as indigenous Xocó people,
and adopted largely invented traditions and cultural practices to prove their indigenous status
to the state, successfully in 1979. In northeastern Brazil racial and cultural mixing had been
so intense that it had been believed previously that indigenous people no longer existed as a
distinct category, replaced by a mestizo sertano culture and identity. After the enactment of a
new law (the ‘Indian Statute’) in 1973 categorising Indian status with attendant ‘rights to land,
federal protection, medical care and benefits’ (ibid.: 67), the peasants who became the Xocó
were encouraged in their indigenous identity claims by Catholic supporters in the context of a
political struggle with a land-owning family for whom they had worked for generations. French
argues that what was evident in this identity assertion, that transformed some groups of peasants, but not others, into indigenous peoples assigned tribal names from the past, was a systematic downplaying of African heritage and of ‘the richness of their sertanejo culture’ (ibid.: 663–4) which they, nevertheless, carried on with in their everyday lives, alongside the newly adopted indigenous practices including a ritual dance (the ‘toré’) and the religious use of hallucinogenic drugs, adopted from other northeastern Brazilian tribes. The emergence of this identity revealed the dialogic nature of identity, the role of opportunity in particular local circumstances, and the role of the battle over resources in the construction of identities. French (ibid.: 664) argues that in this and similar cases:

the upsurge of indigenous self-identification . . . is not just about (or not necessarily at all about) Indianness but is more fundamentally about political subjectivities forged in the struggle for land that, when tied to claims of indigenous identity, result in communities of likeness.

Where French emphasises the invention of identity in the context of political opportunity, Deborah Yashar (1999), surveying struggles more broadly across Latin America, gives a more nuanced explanation, suggesting a role for ethnic survival and renewal, especially in contexts where the reach of the state was weak (i.e. in the Amazon). She suggests that even in contexts where the state sought to incorporate indigenous people as peasants, indigenous identities survived alongside those political organisations of the rural poor such as peasant unions.

In her study of indigenous Mayan resistance and political struggle in Chiapas, Mexico, including the Zapatista rebellion of 1994, June Nash (1995) presents a subtle account of the interaction between an ideological context, involving a 500-year resistance to colonialism expressed as the continuation and reinvocation of indigenous traditions and socialisation patterns, and political and economic contexts, that inspires the varying use of indigenous identity, traditions and claims. She argues for the superiority of these kinds of rich, contextual explanations when compared with more one-sided explanations that overemphasise the role of ethno-culture (including primordialism), rely on economic and class reductionism, or adopt abstract theoretical ‘new social movements’ arguments as if these can alone explain ethnic movements in Latin America. Notably, she shows how indigenous identity is organised differently, and has very different institutional relationships with political parties and governments in Highland areas and Lowland jungle areas of Chiapas, and that these different situations can produce more stratified and oppressive indigenous communal situations in one (the Highlands), and more egalitarian, collectivist indigenous situations in the other (Lowlands).

Marisol De La Cadena (2000), in her study of race, ethnicity and indigeneity in Peru, has argued for a complex process of de-Indianisation by which indigenous people through education and the acquiring of modern skills and cultural adaptation take up new kinds of identity but do not at the same time lose their indigenous identity. The indigenous participants in her anthropological study directly challenge more static conceptions of ‘Indianness’ including those organised through state classifications, rejecting the category ‘Indian’ which is deemed to represent backwardness and poverty, while continuing to honour indigenous histories, cultures and identities. De-indianisation is seen as a subaltern practice of resistance:

de-Indianization is not the shedding of indigenous culture and subsequent ‘integrating’ . . . envisioned as the solution to violence in Peru. Neither does it mean ‘assimilating,’ and thus disappearing culturally, as some anthropologists have presented it . . . Rather, it is through active de-Indianization that subaltern cuzqueños have redefined essentialist notions of
Anthony Moran

culture. They accomplish this by replacing regional beliefs in fixed identities with infinite degrees of fluid Indianness or mestizoness.

(De La Cadena 2000: 6)

This refusal to be restricted by a category of ‘pure’, ‘authentic’ Aboriginality supposedly at odds with the modern world, while retaining a strong sense of indigenous culture and belonging, is an important indigenous contribution to the understanding of identity as a confluence of different influences and historical trajectories. One of Australia’s leading indigenous intellectuals and political leaders, Noel Pearson, has argued for a complex notion of layered identity. Taking his cue from Amartya Sen’s critique of multiculturalism, he argues that the mistake is to imagine that people inhabit ‘singular identities’ (Pearson 2009: 332–43). Neither group nor individual identities are singular. Reflecting on his own complex and multi-layered identity, he writes of his identifications with several different indigenous nations in Australia through his mixed heritage and deep connection with different lands both traditionally, based on tribal affiliation, and based on growing up on the Aboriginal mission of Hope Vale in Northern Queensland. Beyond these identifications, he also identifies with the region of Cape York Peninsula, the state of Queensland and, more ambivalently, with the Australian nation. He also identifies with Christianity and in particular Lutherans, and through them with other Aboriginal Lutherans from other missions, and even non-indigenous Lutherans of Scandinavian and German descent in Australia. Even more distant still, he feels a ‘remnant connection with Neuendettelsau in Bavaria’, the original source of the Lutheran missionaries who came to Australia, and which remains ‘a spiritual wellspring for the people of my village’ (ibid.: 335). He has argued that, like other peoples, Indigenous peoples can engage with the spirit of the Enlightenment while retaining their distinct indigenous identities. Pearson has suggested as a model Jewish people who have thoroughly engaged with the societies they live in, and have advanced economically, while at the same time retaining their distinct identities and sense of belonging to an ancient Jewish people. Pearson calls for a recognition within Australia of indigenous peoplehood, but argues that this does not have to involve separatism, but can co-exist with a process of integration.

Another important development has been the attempt to understand and defend indigenous rights within liberal and communitarian accounts of multiculturalism. Charles Taylor used the example of indigenous people in his famous essay ‘The politics of recognition’, defending a version of group rights that would allow them degrees of autonomy and state protection so that they could continue with their cultural traditions within larger states. Will Kymlicka in Multicultural Citizenship (1995) and elsewhere makes a famous distinction between the rights of immigrant ethnic minorities within nation-states where they have ‘voluntarily’ consented to enter a particular nation through the act of immigration, and therefore can expect little state protection of their distinct cultures; and those of indigenous peoples who were typically conquered and incorporated into nation-states against their will and without direct consent. The latter have rights to protection of their culture, including provisions to teach in their own languages, to be protected from intrusions from the external society, rights to land and special rights to hunt and so on. However, Kymlicka’s liberalism means that he emphasises the right of individuals to ‘exit’ what they may experience as oppressive communal situations, and thus collective indigenous rights are limited by a broader ‘Western’ liberal framework, centred on individual liberty. This kind of limitation is not necessarily considered acceptable by indigenous peoples themselves, who see their rights as inherent and rooted in other, ancient indigenous traditions.
Main criticisms

Many of the criticisms of multiculturalism and the politics of identity extend to critiques of indigenous politics and the assertions of political rights and separatism based on cultural claims about the uniqueness of indigeneity. Political philosophers such as Brian Barry (2001) claim that the liberal state, ‘difference-blind’ and ignoring culture, has far more chance of achieving equality and social justice than any form of politics that bases claims for recognition, special privileges, and exemptions on the needs of culture and identity.

Some critics argue that within nation-states there has been so much genetic and cultural mixing of populations that indigenous peoples can no longer legitimately argue that they have a special claim on land and resources on the basis of being original occupants of lands and of having distinct, ancient cultures. Alternatively, it is argued that since indigenous status ultimately relies on some element of blood descent, that it involves a discredited concept of race to argue its case. In effect, such critics argue, requests for special conditions and protections based on claims to indigeneity, and their granting by states, are racist and discriminate against non-indigenous members of the same nation-states. The notion that within democratic states, one ethnic group is deemed to have a special place and a special relationship with the land, and special rights over decision-making on that land, clashes with notions of equality of all citizens within democracy.

Others argue against the authenticity of many indigenous identities, especially of those people living and working in industrial societies, sometimes university educated and living professional, middle-class lives. For some critics, much that passes itself off as indigenous identity and culture is fictive, a modern invention for political, monetary and other gains. This criticism, however, typically relies on the assumption that indigenous identity is static and that, where it changes or develops it inevitably disappears. The counter-claim is that this is a colonialist argument, conveniently consigning indigenous identities and communities to the vanquished past in order to ignore unpleasant and sometimes costly indigenous claims, and thus an ideology aimed to complete the colonial conquest.

Critics argue that recognition of indigenous identities and rights, including the right to live on ancestral lands partly separated from mainstream society and economy, and to continue on with activities and ways of life from a ‘by-gone era’, has had the disastrous consequence of creating and sustaining islands of welfare dependency and disadvantage. By rejecting assimilation policies, states have created artificial communities and non-sustainable lifestyles where children do not receive adequate schooling and education, including the acquisition of mainstream language, literacy and numeracy skills, and where people are allowed to sink into lives of poverty and substance abuse, where moral norms and discipline have broken down, and parental responsibility has been abandoned. These communities are artificially propped up by access to welfare benefits, and are riven by crime including sexual abuse of women and children. Though his argument does not accord with the claim that these problems are caused by the recognition of indigenous rights (including traditional land rights) and identities, Australian indigenous leader and intellectual Noel Pearson (mentioned previously) has spear-headed the campaign in Australia to reject ‘passive welfare’ in indigenous communities and to restore norms of responsibility in communities, especially responsibility for children’s welfare (see Pearson 2009). Other indigenous leaders and intellectuals in Australia, including Marcia Langton and Mick Dodson, have been courageous critical voices against sexual and physical violence against women and children in Aboriginal communities.

Another area of criticism concerns the attempt to accommodate concepts of ‘group’ or ‘collective’ rights. Indigenous peoples often make claims for collective or group rights rather
than simply individual rights, and some liberals such as Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka lean in the direction of accommodating such concepts. Jurgen Habermas (1994), in his response to Taylor’s essay ‘The politics of recognition’ makes a strong case that the concept of collective rights cannot be accommodated within liberal democratic theory, and that instead all claims to rights can only be based on the rights of individuals, including any claims to culture and respect. Within liberalism the freedom of the individual is sacrosanct, including the freedom to accept or reject cultural traditions, ways of life and collective identities. The democratic state should not get into the act of trying to preserve cultures; all that it should ensure is that there is no discrimination of individuals on the basis of culture, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and so on. Cultures and ways of life in modernity must be able to stand on their own merits; they must be able to convince their freely choosing individual members that they, or aspects of them, are worth preserving.

Indigenous peoples themselves dispute the conceptual distinction between individual and group underpinning debates about rights within liberalism and communitarianism. As individual, group, land and spirit are considered as forming an indivisible whole in a radically non-Western, incommensurable indigenous tradition and world-view, indigenous people see their claim to pursue indigenous group rights as unique and just (see Holder and Corntassel 2002; Niezen 2003: ch. 4). As Holder and Corntassel (2002: 128) point out, indigenous groups assert that the right to determine for themselves the terms on which members interact with outsiders and with one another is an essential part of protecting their right to self-determination and so represents a goal toward which any fight for group recognition must aim.

They argue that from an indigenous perspective there is no real contradiction between the pursuit of individual and group rights and goals, as ‘the preserving of communal life can be important to individuals’ well-being, in addition to the various spiritual and symbolic resources which such life may provide’ (Holder and Corntassel 2002: 129).

Discussing the political ramifications of these issues when they are played out within nation-states, Guntrum Werther (1992) points out that successful indigenous claims to self-determination since the 1960s have involved a major concession from liberal democratic governments, resulting in a reformulation of the democratic state in which ‘modern aboriginal polities exist based upon a non-liberal idea of political legitimacy (aboriginal status) and in which a dual construction of political rights is acknowledged’ (Werther 1992: 85). Werther sees this as an ultimately unstable situation in which liberal assumptions about the nature of the democratic state are undermined, often in an unacknowledged way as part of historical, political compromises in the context of domestic and international pressures. Political backlashes from majority populations are an ever-present threat, especially as the reality of indigenous demands bites home, involving clashes over economic interests and control of resources. Also, there are competing nation-state policy aims such as modernisation and economic development, and Werther (ibid.: 42) believes that these will generally and ultimately predominate over claims associated with indigenous status.

Though there have been political compromises in already developed Western countries, countries in the process of economic development and industrialisation, as in some parts of Asia, have been less than enthusiastic about recognising traditional indigenous rights, and in some cases refuse to recognise indigenous identity at all, arguing that it is a Western and imposed concept, as was the case in China, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and, in the main, Indonesia in noted political and legal controversies in the 1980s and 1990s (Kingsbury 1998).
Critics also raise the problem of oppression within indigenous communities and how this can be addressed if the surrounding state and society have made important concessions to self-government and cultural survival. Although himself a supporter of indigenous rights, anthropologist Ronald Niezen (2003: 99) provides examples from his own experiences of living on Aboriginal land in Canada. Cree women from neighbouring communities came to his home to discuss their problems as ‘dissidents’ of Aboriginal communities where they and others had been harassed and physically intimidated, lost their homes and possessions, were denied band membership and were denied access to public forums such as radio, because they disagreed with the policies of ruling factions. Experiences of corruption and rights abuses were widespread across indigenous communities, according to a grassroots national Aboriginal organisation, and the problem was that victims had no real avenue for redress, because of the provisions of the Indian Act and governments’ reluctance to interfere with Aboriginal self-government.

Another sympathetic anthropologist, June Nash (1995), nevertheless explains how in the Highlands of Chiapas, Mexico, powerful, sometimes corrupt and violent indigenous factions developed through patron-clientelist relations with political parties and government. Asserting claims about indigenous tradition, they expelled thousands of indigenous Protestant converts from their communities, so that the latter became disenfranchised, dispossessed refugees. She also discusses forms of corruption where funds are diverted to the families of the powerful indigenous factions, and political violence when other indigenous people try to protest against corruption. Political parties and governments turn a blind eye as they rely upon the political support of the powerful indigenous factions.

As Niezen (2003: 219) explains, these examples of indigenous intra-communal oppression not only trouble indigenous victims, but also are deeply troubling to liberal human rights theorists. To what extent, they ask, does self-determination strengthen illiberal governments? In addition, if the principle of self-determination is accepted in a strong sense, what is to stop states from deciding that they are the true representatives of collectivities, and the true preservers of cultural integrity, and therefore to ride roughshod over the desires of diverse indigenous peoples and individuals?

### The continuing importance of perspectives on indigenous identity and rights, and anticipated future developments

The development of indigenous rights in a global context represents an important and, in certain respects, unique set of political and identity claims based on the argument that the damage of colonisation can, at least partially, be undone. Indigenous peoples argue that in order for colonialism to be overcome, and for humanity to enter a true phase of post-colonialism, there must be radical acceptance of the survival and rights of identities and cultures that are radically different to Western identities and cultures. This is a politics of resistance, adaptation, accommodation and restoration. It also represents a continuing contribution to the discourse and practice of decolonisation across the globe.

Indigenous peoples’ claims go beyond standard multicultural claims for equality and non-discrimination, to assert much more specific, indigenous rights and protections that are deemed to be inherent in their status as original peoples – rights that are not accorded to non-indigenous peoples. These claims will continue to challenge nation-states to make compromises and accommodations, to rethink their concepts of unitary citizenship, and perhaps to rethink the nature of their sovereignty and even their national identities. For this and related reasons, they will also continue to be controversial and inspire conflict.
According to Niezen, self-determination is at once the greatest challenge from indigenous peoples, and also a key unifying claim for the global indigenous movement. It is a challenge to the statist organisation of international relations (in its claim for indigenous rights that move beyond states) and a challenge to nation-states internally:

There are thus two principle ways in which the indigenous peoples’ movement challenges state sovereignty: One is at the international level, pressing for reforms within international law and eroding the statist orientation of the international system; the other is as a pluralistic force within states that presses for realization in practice of the notion, uncomfortable to many, of nations within nations, of peoples who have rights to self-determination nested within their rights as citizens of states.

(Niezen 2003: 148)

As writers such as Deborah Yashar (1999) argue, the history of indigenous struggles for recognition and rights in Latin America tells an important new story about democratic developments that moves beyond simplistic theories of democratic consolidation. Rather, these struggles have contributed to a situation where everything is in flux, where democratic institution building remains fluid and indeterminate, and where states are called upon to reform themselves to better reflect and accommodate plural identities and administrative heterogeneity. States are continually debating issues of constitutional reform, decentralisation, recognising local territorial autonomy, legal pluralism and so on (Yashar 1999: 97). Indigenous peoples challenge democratic states to rethink citizenship beyond the notion of unitary citizenship, and to find new and innovative ways to enhance multicultural citizenship. The challenges from indigenous peoples have resulted in new forms of democratisation, and new ways of institutionalising participation and rights, combining commitments to ‘universal claims to citizenship and differentiated claims to difference’ (ibid.: 39). With calls for autonomy and respect for local forms of governance, indigenous peoples challenge assumptions about liberal democratic politics:

Rather than delineate a single relationship between the state and its citizens, indigenous organizations demand multiple types of citizenship with boundaries that guarantee equal rights and representation at the national level and recognize corporate indigenous authority structures in the indigenous territory.

( ibid.: 39)

The struggles of indigenous peoples have led to important developments in international norm setting, and are likely to continue to do so for the foreseeable future as the full implications of the adoption, by nearly all states, of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is elaborated on the ground in myriad different contexts. Will Kymlicka (2007) points out that the pursuit of indigenous rights at the international level after the Second World War was the most significant contributor to the development of multicultural politics as we understand it today. It was through these arguments and claims that the modern reinvigoration of minority rights within states gathered momentum from the 1980s onwards.

Indigenous authors argue that indigenous people have made, and continue to make, an important contribution to the elaboration of rights discourse. Holder and Comnassell (2002) argue, for example, that the practical elaborations and claims about rights evident in many indigenous political struggles have major relevance for the theoretical arguments about individual and group rights, suggesting a pathway between arguments that suggest that the two types of rights are necessarily in conflict.
Finally, indigenous thinkers continue to challenge old dichotomies between tradition and modernity, Enlightenment and superstition or enchantment, mind and matter, cultural change and cultural continuity.

References


