INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND OTHER MINORITIES: CHALLENGES OF MOBILISATION AND LEGITIMACY

ABSTRACT

As is well known, the history of indigenous peoples is one of economic marginalisation, cultural subordination and political peripherality. This very feature is built into the widely accepted international definition of indigenous peoples as culturally distinct groups which trace their origins back to a pre-conquest or pre-colonial period, are “non-dominant”, or, in practice, subordinate in relation to the rest of society, and share a minimum level of collective consciousness. This paper explores the borders between indigenous peoples and other types of ethnic or national groups, initially by exploring issues of definition. It goes on to consider three major domains of differentiation: cultural (including linguistic) distinctiveness and autonomy, relative socio-economic status, and collective identity. It uses data from central statistics offices and other official sources to explore similarities and differences between minorities of these types, and to speculate on the implications—academic and practical—of similarities between indigenous peoples and other ethnic minorities.
When the ninth session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues met in New York on 19-30 April 2010, the list of participating “indigenous people’s organisations” included the Office for Israeli Constitutional Law (OFICL) (UN, 2010). The OFICL subsequently issued a Statement on Jewish indigenous status in the land of Israel/Palestine which claimed that “the Jewish People have had a continuous presence” in Israel/Palestine for 3,500 years, and that “the Jewish People never lost sight of the dream to return home to a Jewish independent country in the Land of Israel as promised to the prophets in the Bible” (OFICL, 2010). The associated claim to all of the territories under current de facto Israeli control (including the West Bank and Gaza) represented an obvious clash with Palestinian claims to jurisdiction over precisely the same lands. The Palestinian perspective was not advanced in the same way at the Forum, but the indigenous status of the Palestinian population is widely acknowledged. 

This episode offers a revealing insight into the importance of “indigenous” status for ethnic groups seeking to advance their rights. It has been pointed out that the past five decades have been witness to a remarkable mobilisation of indigenous peoples, and to a growing internationalisation of indigenous politics, with the development of important links between activists in different countries (Saglie and Sullivan, 2011: 1). It is probably no coincidence that the same period has also been characterised by the rise of the politics of nationalism more generally, and of ethnic unrest. Indeed, it is likely that both processes were spurred on by that modern year of revolution, 1968, during which minorities across the globe suddenly saw that not alone were their grievances not acceptable, but they were not inevitable either—a social psychological shift that promoted a new wave of characteristic forms of protest politics (Allardt, 1979).

The study of indigenous politics has been facilitated by the fact that there appears to be substantial (though not complete) agreement on what constitutes an indigenous people, in the sense that particular groups may normally be placed clearly inside or outside that category. Thus in Finland, for example, the “indigenous” status of the Sami is conventionally seen as placing them in a different category from, say, the very distinctive and historically important Swedish-Finnish minority. This is despite the fact that the UN system has never adopted a definition, an omission that appears to be due to the fact that observers representing indigenous organisations “rejected the idea of a formal definition of indigenous peoples at the international level to be adopted by states” (UN, 2009: 5). This position contrasts with the many difficulties encountered in defining related terms such as “ethnic group” and “nation”, difficulties that have impeded not only scholarly discussion but also the identification of particular groups as falling into or lying outside these categories (Connor, 1978). Analysts may agree that there is a Scottish “nation” within the United Kingdom, but are there also Welsh and Northern Irish ones? Or is the latter a mixture of Irish and “British” nations? And does an English nation exist? The answers to these particular questions may be of interest only to scholars; but there are circumstances where, as in former communist countries such as the Soviet Union, the answer mattered greatly at a practical level: groups designated “nations” were entitled to an array of specific institutional and constitutional rights.

This definitional issue is the starting point of this paper, which seeks to explore further the concept of “indigenous” status in the context of the wider debate on terminology in nationalism studies. The question of definition is, then, not just of academic but also of public policy significance. Furthermore, it is important not just at the collective level (in determining, say, whether a particular population group is or is not an “ethnic group” or an “indigenous people”); it matters also at the individual level (in seeking to provide guidelines for defining
the boundaries of such groups—who is a member, and who is not?). The object of this paper is to explore the significance of the “indigenous” label, from both an analytical and a public policy perspective. The paper is divided into two main parts. The first considers matters of definition: the criteria for endowing a group with indigenous status. The second reviews the extent to which classification as “indigenous” offers an insight into the path of mobilisation of particular movements. Do such movements differ from groups which are not usually so labelled?

**THE CONCEPT OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

The Bureau of Indian Affairs of the US Department of the Interior is one of the many agencies that governments across the world use to manage their relationship with indigenous peoples. Yet an uninformed observer could be forgiven for naively assuming that a body with this name must surely be concerned mainly with relations with New Delhi, and that it has been mistakenly transferred from the US State Department. The designation “Indian” not alone undermines the notion of indigenous standing in respect of those to whom it refers; it also implies alien status. Issues of naming of this kind frequently play into a political agenda. It is typically the dominant group which allocates the name to a subordinate one, and this may be used to delegitimise or marginalise minorities (Safran, 2008). Furthermore, even when such labels were originally non-judgmental descriptors, they often later acquired strongly negative connotations, resulting in a push to replace an “offensive” label by a more “neutral” one. For example, such terms as “Negro” and “Tinker” came in time to imply low socioeconomic status and social marginalisation, began to be seen as socially unacceptable and indeed “taboo” words, and were replaced by “Black” or “African American” in the first case, and “Irish Traveller” or “Itinerant” in the second. Not surprisingly, this happened also in the case of many of the labels used in respect of indigenous peoples. The most striking example of renaming is, perhaps, the relabelling of most of the indigenous groups of Canada as “First Nations”. The political significance of this is unmistakeable, illustrating a point made by Michael Banton (1997: 18-24) to the effect that a group name may have implications for a particular territorial claim, or for indigenous status.

Defining indigenous status is a more general issue than naming particular groups. We consider this further below, focussing in particular on the manner in which the international community arrived at a useful working definition of this concept. The paper continues by looking at the kinds of consideration that arise when elements of this definition overlap with the defining features of other kinds of ethnic group, an overlap that may be problematic from a public policy perspective but one that is valuable from an analytical perspective.

**Defining indigenous peoples**

Current discussion of the concept of “indigenous peoples” needs to be seen in the light of the evolution of such terminology. There is a long tradition within the international community of seeking to protect the rights of “minorities”, however defined. This existed in embryonic form under the “Concert of Europe” system that developed from the Congress of Vienna (1814-15), which placed an obligation on states to respect the rights of certain religious minorities. It was further developed under the League of Nations Minorities Treaties system after 1919, this time with a particular emphasis on the protection of the rights of linguistic minorities (Mair, 1928; Laponce, 1960; Galántai, 1992). Following a shift to prioritising individual rights after the second world war under the United Nations system, the pendulum swung back to the issue of group rights after the fall of communism in 1989, with such bodies as the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe now focusing on the protection of new minorities. The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, adopted by the Council of Europe in 1994, is an example of one of the resulting instruments, dealing in particular with language rights (Malloy, 2006: 28-30, 53-77; Gülalp, 2006).

The focus of the initiatives discussed above was mainly on minorities within European states; minorities created by European imperial expansion were largely ignored. The International Labour Organisation (ILO), however, was forced to address the issue at an early stage, and
sought to provide a clearer definition in particular of the concept of “indigenous peoples”. It identified two categories in 1957:

(a) members of tribal or semi-tribal populations in independent countries whose social and economic conditions are at a less advanced stage than the stage reached by the other sections of the national community, and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations;

(b) members of tribal or semi-tribal populations in independent countries which are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonisation and which, irrespective of their legal status, live more in conformity with the social, economic and cultural institutions of that time than with the institutions of the nation to which they belong (ILO, 1957: art. 1.1)

Both categories referred to populations that were at least partly “tribal” (a difficult and value-laden term), and which enjoyed a certain measure of autonomy or legal recognition, at least at the cultural level. Category (a) introduces the additional criterion of relatively low socio-economic status. Category (b) adds instead the principle of descent from a precolonial population. The ILO amended the definition in 1989, so that category (a) now referred to groups which were “distinguished” from others, rather than being at a “less advanced stage” than them. The reference to “tribal or semi-tribal populations” was dropped from category (b), which now referred simply to “peoples”:

(a) tribal peoples in independent countries whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community, and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations;

(b) peoples in independent countries who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonisation or the establishment of present state boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions (ILO, 1989: art. 1.1).

Parallel to these efforts, an alternative definition, widely used within and outside the UN system was devised after exhaustive research—the well-known formulation of José Martínez Cobo. This dropped the term “tribe”, referring instead to “communities, peoples and nations”, and required a certain level of collective identity and political will, emphasising the groups’ marginal (“non-dominant”) status and descent from precolonial peoples:

Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant 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 system (Martínez, 1987: 29).

The criteria of “historical continuity” identified by Martínez included occupation of ancestral lands, common ancestry with the original occupants of these lands, cultural characteristics (such as religion and other aspects of lifestyle), language, and region of residence. Membership of the group was to be determined by two familiar criteria: subjective identification with it, and acceptance by the group itself.

The borders of the indigenous concept

The Martínez definition had the great advantage of ease of use: Martínez himself had used an earlier version of this to draw up a relatively precise list of indigenous communities spread over 37 countries throughout the world (Martínez, 1981: 5-6). It is worth analysing some of its components further. The definition seems to comprise five criteria:
• Historical continuity with a population predating colonial intervention and conquest
• Non-dominant status
• Distinctive cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems
• Collective self-perception as distinct
• Disposition to transmit territory and identity across generations.

The last two of these criteria are subjective and hard to measure; and in any case they form part of the definition of all ethnic groups. Each of the three other more “objective” characteristics raises interesting questions about the definition of indigenous peoples, though all of them are commonly associated also with definitions of ethnic groups that are not necessarily indigenous. We now consider them in turn.

Non-dominant status. Can an indigenous people constitute a majority of the population? Martínez appears to have believed so: he reported two countries on his list as having indigenous populations that were majorities of the total population—60% in Guatemala and 59% in Bolivia—and in a third case, Greenland, the indigenous population amounted to 83%, but this was a much smaller proportion of the total population of Denmark, of which Greenland was part (Martínez, 1981: 5-6). However, majorities do not necessarily hold political power, so it is possible to see these cases as compatible with the “non-dominant” criterion (the socio-economic aspect of non-dominant status is discussed later).

With a view to exploring this boundary further, we may consider a set of cases that constitute a demographic gradient. There are important respects in which the European colonial enterprise in Africa and Asia was different from that in the Americas and Oceania—notably, in its much lighter impact on local demography. Settlers in the former never succeeded in uprooting and undermining the local population in the manner in which they did in the latter. But the distinction is not entirely clear-cut. There are parts of the “new world”, such as Peru, where local populations were not overwhelmed by Europeans, and a very sizeable indigenous or mestizo population survives. But there are also parts of Africa, such as South Africa, where the European impact, though failing to displace the local population, was quite significant from a demographic and political perspective.

![Relative size of “indigenous” population, selected cases](image-url)  
**Figure 1:** Relative size of “indigenous” population, selected cases

Source: Based on information from statistical offices of the countries in question.
Figure 1 illustrates the kinds of question that arise here. At either end are two cases that at first sight appear unproblematic. On the left is Canada where, as in the USA and Australia, the indigenous population is clearly demographically marginal, though it may occupy extensive (if poor) territories. On the right is Zimbabwe where, as in many other African states, the population of European origin is very small—so small that labelling the rest of the population “indigenous” raises difficult questions. One level in from these at either side, the picture becomes more complex. In New Zealand, the Māori population, hovering around 15% of the total, possesses a level of internal cultural affinity and a degree of institutional and political recognition that is absent in the case of indigenous groups elsewhere. On the other side, the African population of South Africa accounts for the great bulk of the population (79%), but otherwise shares many of the characteristics of other indigenous peoples—a legacy of social and economic marginalisation, political exclusion and cultural fragmentation. This fragmentation may be seen in the domain of language: within the African population, the largest group speaks Zulu (30%), followed by Xhosa (22%) and Sepedi (12%), but with many other languages also spoken (computed from South Africa, 2011).

It is, however, the two middle categories of figure 1 that draw attention to the most severe difficulty. The cases of Kazakhstan and Fiji are ones that illustrate finely balanced demographic competition, with an indigenous group being subjected to strong pressure from immigrants, losing their majority status, but later regaining this (choice of a later year, from 1999 onwards, would show Kazakhs as once again a majority, and choice of an earlier year, from 1936 to 1986, would show Fijians as a minority). But there are other complexities. The group which threatened the demographic security of the Fijian population was not of European origin, but the Fijian Indian population, descended largely from indentured labourers brought in during the period of British rule. Kazakhstan, long part of the Russian Empire and later of the Soviet Union, experienced Russian immigration mainly in the formal context of shared statehood with the Russians, rather than as a colonial possession. Both cases bear a clear resemblance to the relationship between indigenous peoples and settler population groups in the other cases discussed. But only the two bars on the left seem to fall within the strict definition of indigenous peoples.

**Historical continuity.** Discussion of these cases draws attention to a second respect in which indigenous peoples differ from many other (but not necessarily all other) ethnic groups: there is an implicit assumption that indigenous peoples have been shaped by later European intervention, whether in crude colonial form (as in the Americas and Oceania) or, in a less systematic way, by failure to absorb certain ethnic groups following an entirely different lifestyle from the majority (as in Scandinavia and Russia). But how defensible is the case for excluding from this category such peoples as the Welsh or the Bretons, who seem to have been subjected to many of the same kinds of pressure as classical indigenous minorities?

Indeed, it is worth recalling a whole literature that sought to re-import the notion of colonialism to a domestic European context, arguing that there were important similarities between the relationship between European colonial empires and their non-European possessions, on the one hand, and the relationship between the core areas of European states and their own domestic but culturally dissimilar peripheries, on the other. Thus, Robert Lafont (1967) and Eugene Weber (1976) analysed the socio-economic, cultural and political consequences of the penetration of the outlying regions of metropolitan France by the greater Paris region, and Michael Hechter (1975) outlined in detail (and not without attracting criticism especially in his treatment of Scotland and Wales) the manner in which the British state sought to integrate its Celtic peripheries along “internal colonialist” lines. Indeed, there are important respects in which the reactions of the peoples of Ireland, Wales, Brittany and Languedoc to the state-building process in the nineteenth century resembled those of indigenous peoples outside Europe in response to colonial expansion. It is easy to forget, in the context of established Irish statehood, that in the early nineteenth century the Irish resembled indigenous peoples elsewhere in many ways—economically depressed, politically marginalised and culturally stigmatised. Elements of these attitudes survived into the late nineteenth century, as figure 2 shows. Victorian caricaturists in such magazines as **Punch**
commonly depicted the Irish as wild, ape-like creatures, and these attitudes also crossed the Atlantic, finding similar expression in *Punch*’s New York counterpart, *Puck* (Curtis, 1997).

Quite apart from the question of “objective” descent from precolonial groups, the issue of historical myth is of great importance (Coakley, 2004). Particular interpretations of history and even of archaeology may be used to justify contemporary claims to disputed territory, as will be seen in the extensive historical section in the Israeli Foreign Ministry web site and such official publications as *The land of promise* (Israel, 2003), or from the use in Palestinian schools of textbooks that state a prior Palestinian claim to the same land (Manor, 2003: 26-31). But all nations possess a historical myth that purports to account for its origins. The Greeks, for example, saw themselves as having a particular entitlement to their land since they claimed to have been there since before the beginning of recorded history. The Basques, similarly, were claimed to be a pure-blooded race, descended from Noah, and located in their homeland since the Deluge (Greenwood, 1985). Distinguished forebears (and often biblical origins) were claimed also by many other European peoples, such as the Flemish, Welsh, Danes, Magyars, Bulgarians and Romanians—to name just a few. But historical claims have a particular resonance in the encounter between indigenous peoples and the descendants of settlers. Thus it was that bitter “history wars” broke out in the 1990s as Australians debated their past, and, in particular, as some addressed the legacy of the dispossession and marginalisation of the aboriginal population. Prime Minister John Howard joined in, decrying the “black armband” approach, which, he said, described Australian history since the beginning of European settlement as “little more than a disgraceful story of imperialism, exploitation, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination”, and called instead for emphasis on the “heroic achievement” of his people (McKenna, 1997).

![Figure 2: Images of the Irish peasant, 1882](image)

Note: The figure on the left (labelled the “King of A-Shantee”) is from the US magazine *Puck*; on the right, the “Irish Frankenstein” is from the British magazine *Punch*.

Source: Curtis, 1997: 43, 63
Cultural distinctiveness. Cultural distinctiveness of some kind is normally a key element in the definition of ethnic groups or nations; but the Martinez definition adds two more demanding features, distinctive social institutions and legal systems. These refer to such characteristics as distinctive family structure, local institutions and customary law, characteristics that are increasingly rare in a globalising world. It is likely that such features have substantially disappeared in some groups that would be conventionally labelled “indigenous”; but elements of these may well be found in certain groups that would not be so labelled. For example, following Irish independence in 1922, brief and quite unsuccessful efforts were made to use Irish customary law (Brehon law) in a court system that was essentially English in origin, framework and culture.

The difficulty in drawing a clear-cut line between groups that would be labelled “indigenous” in respect of this criterion and those which would not is illustrated in figure 3. This reproduces four illustrations from a large Soviet ethnographic encyclopedia (Bromlei, 1988). Even if we confine ourselves to those lifestyle features that commonly play a role in defining indigenous peoples—such as dress and housing—these may be applied also to major European ethnic groups or “nations” (such as the Germans and the Estonians) as easily as they may be to peoples to whom the word “indigenous” may at least in certain circumstances apply (as in Columbia and Micronesia). Of course, the images reflect idealised stereotypes; the point is that critical aspects of the physical culture of these groups may be stereotyped, not that the drawings represent an accurate depiction of how such peoples lived. Perhaps not surprisingly, this difficulty in drawing a dividing line between indigenous peoples and other minorities presents a challenge to those states (such as India, Malaysia and Russia) that make such a distinction.

It is, then, important to note the distinctiveness of the classical indigenous experience, especially in circumstances where indigenous populations may be engaged in an uneven struggle for rights. But this should not blind us, from an analytical perspective, to the porousness of the boundary between these “classical” cases and other ethnic groups, perhaps possessing a much more extensive array of rights and even privileges, but which seem to fit mainstream definitions of “indigenous”.

THE POLITICS OF MOBILISATION AND LEGITIMACY

Like other ethnic groups and nations, indigenous peoples are not static phenomena: they change as a consequence of their own internal dynamics, but also in response to developments in their external environment and in their relations with the locally dominant group. What are the implications of such changes for indigenous mobilisation and for the ideological superstructure that legitimises indigenous claims? If we look at the three quasi-“objective” defining features just considered, one is relatively static. Historical reality (descent from a pre-colonial population) cannot be changed, though of course consciousness of the past may be reshaped and historical myths may be pushed in different directions. But the other two characteristics (cultural distinctiveness, and non-dominant status) may—and indeed are likely to—change over the years, and such change is likely to have implications for the subjective components (sense of group identity and disposition to follow particular political priorities). In this section we consider these three features—culture, status and collective thought processes—in turn. In the discussion that follows, though, the position of indigenous peoples is review in a wider context, one that considers parallel changes (and their implications) in the case of other minorities too.

Cultural distinctiveness

One of the most characteristic features of indigenous peoples has been the possession of a distinct language and culture that differentiated these communities sharply from European settlers. Religious traditions were commonly linked to local systems of belief and worship, lifestyles were typically non-urban (and sometimes nomadic), and languages tended to have a local domain, and were often unrelated to each other. This distinguished such communities from European colonists, adherents of one of the branches of Christianity, often of urban (though sometimes agriculturalist) backgrounds, and speakers of languages of wider
communication with a large corpus of written and printed material. These languages, usually Indo-European, were typically entirely unrelated to the languages of the indigenous peoples.

Figure 3. Stereotypes of national costumes, Columbia and Estonia, and of houses, Micronesia and Germany

The subsequent relationship between indigenous peoples and their conquerors in this domain tended to be one of assimilation. Missionaries were an important instrument of conquest and pacification, with conversions to Christianity drawing indigenous groups into a new cultural ambit (the Jesuit missions in South America were an exception in pursuing conversion but laying less emphasis on assimilation). Traditional lifestyles came under pressure as the colonial advance proceeded. Over time, the tendency to shift to the language of the coloniser became a powerful one, especially as traditional communities became dispersed.

Yet these developments were by no means confined to the classical indigenous experience. Within Europe too, marginalised cultures were being swamped by metropolitan ones. The process was described as follows by John Stewart Mill in the middle of the nineteenth century:

Experience proves that it is possible for one nationality to merge and be absorbed in another; and when it was originally an inferior and more backward portion of the human race the absorption is greatly to its advantage. Nobody can suppose that it is not more beneficial to a Breton, or a Basque of French Navarre, to be brought into the current of the ideas and feelings of a highly civilised and cultivated people—to be a member of the French nationality, admitted on equal terms to all the privileges of French citizenship, sharing the advantages of French protection and the dignity and prestige of French power—than to sulk on his own rocks, the half-savage relic of past times, revolving in his own little mental orbit, without participation or interest in the general movement of the world (Mill, 1958 [1861]: 233-4).

This reflected the language also of the Marxist tradition, which predicted the disappearance of Völkerabfälle (ethnic trash) as the progressive cultures of the towns advanced. The many descriptions of this process evoke comparison with similar developments in respect of indigenous languages encountered by European settlers in other parts of the world. Engels’s vivid description of the spread of German culture in central Europe, at the expense of the Czechs, Slovaks, Slovenes and others, could be seen as describing a process that would be familiar to many indigenous peoples:

The importance of the German element in the Slavonic frontier localities, thus rising with the growth of towns, trade and manufactures, was still increased when it was found necessary to import almost every element of mental culture from Germany; after the German merchant and handicraftsman, the German clergyman, the German schoolmaster, the German savant came to establish himself upon Slavonic soil. And lastly, the iron tread of conquering armies, or the cautious, well-premeditated grasp of diplomacy not only followed, but many times went ahead of the slow but sure advance of denationalisation by social developments (Engels, 1979 [1852]: 44).

As it happened, this specific example turned out to be misguided and inaccurate: the various Slav nationalities ultimately flourished, and mobilised successfully against their external masters. But Engels’s description relatively accurately summarises the fate of the Celtic languages in the United Kingdom in the face of the advance of English (with Welsh resisting absorption much more successfully than Irish or Scottish Gaelic) and of the regional languages of France in respect of French—even where, as in Alsace, they had a powerful (German) relative.

The process of language decline seems to have been a general (though not necessarily universal) one among indigenous peoples, with shift to the metropolitan language being associated with education and with upward social mobility. The position among the Māori of New Zealand is compared in figure 4 with the pattern in three comparable European cases: the decline of Breton and Frisian in the twentieth century, and of Irish in the nineteenth century. This decline is tracked in the respective cases by looking at differences between decennial age cohorts. Decline in all cases is pronounced, though with the position in Friesland showing less evidence of disappearance of the indigenous language than in the other cases. Much of the available evidence shows a similar pattern among the languages of
the indigenous peoples of Australia and the Americas, and the process can be tracked more systematically in the case of the indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation.

Cultural change is not, however, simply a matter of language shift, though language boundaries tend to be one of the most effective mechanisms for the protection of communal culture. With enhanced patterns of communication and geographical mobility, other aspects of indigenous culture are endangered—patterns of lifestyle, modes of dress, folklore (including music, dancing and storytelling), traditional medical knowledge and other aspects of the indigenous experience. Although some of these aspects of traditional culture may survive or even enjoy a revival, this is the context of a more cosmopolitan acceptance of multicultural values. The dominant group may (but sometimes will not) accept the validity of the indigenous culture; but it is the indigenous group which makes the ultimate compromise, retaining elements of its traditional culture within the context of acceptance of the dominance of all aspects of the metropolitan culture.

Figure 4. Declining languages by age group, Brittany, Friesland, Ireland and New Zealand Māori, 1881-2001

Note: Data refer to language in which brought up as a child (Brittany, Friesland) and knowledge of languages (Ireland and New Zealand); bilinguals are grouped with other Māori speakers in New Zealand. Speakers of foreign languages are grouped with French and Dutch respectively in Brittany and Friesland.

Socio-economic status

In considering the “non-dominant” status of indigenous populations above, we discussed primarily demographic strength—the question whether the population is in fact a numerical minority. But non-dominant status receives powerful expression through measures of social inequality, and through distinctive alignment with positions in the labour market. In many societies there is a strong association between particular occupational categories and ethnic divisions—sometimes taking the form of an “ethnic division of labour”, with a strong link between ethnic affiliation and social stratification. For example, in Malaysia in 2006, when the Chinese accounted for just 23% of the total population, they made up 48% of the major professional groups (including 72% of accountants, 53% of architects and 47% of engineers); the Malays, 61% of the population, made up only 40% of this group (Malaysia, 2008: 37, 235). In Fiji in 1976, when native Fijians made up 46% of the population and Indians 47%, there was a similar imbalance in the professions, with Fijians accounting for 17% and Indians for 60% (Fiji, 1977: 354-99).

Many other such examples could be cited: the disproportionate representation of African Americans in the domestic service sector, for instance, or of immigrant minorities in the hospitality sector in Europe. In nineteenth century central and eastern Europe, and in Ireland, there was a similarly strong relationship between socio-economic background and ethnic (linguistic or religious) affiliation, with “indigenous” peasants engaged in social and political conflict with landlords drawn from a different cultural community.

![Figure 5. Indicators of economic development in selected regions, United Kingdom, Canada, Spain and Yugoslavia, c. 1950](image)

Note. The bars represent deviations from the overall index for the country in question (100). The indicators are indices of (a) average wages and salaries per head of total population, 1948; (b) relative levels of per capita personal income exclusive of government transfers, 1950-52; (c) coefficients of industrial production excluding energy, 1955; (d) reproducible tangible wealth per head, end 1953.

But it needs to be stressed that not all ethnic minorities, or minority nations, are deprived: some may enjoy a position of relative advantage. Examples include the Swede-Finns and (southern) Irish Protestants, minorities which formed the traditional ruling group in the societies of which they are now just a small part. Some further examples are indicated in figure 5, which uses indicators of economic development in the mid-twentieth century (before the most recent wave of nationalism took off) to illustrate two quite different types of socio-economic relations with the dominant group. This shows such regions as Catalonia and the Basque Country in Spain, and Croatia and Slovenia in Yugoslavia, as enjoying apparently above-average levels of economic achievement—but nationalist elites in those societies still complained that their wealth was being siphoned off by the central government to subsidise poorer regions. The cases of Wales, Galicia, Macedonia and, at least at one stage, Quebec show a quite different pattern—one shared with many indigenous peoples. Here the complaint of nationalist elites was that it was precisely because of exploitation by the central state that these regions were economically backward.

![Figure 6. Comparative median income levels of selected groups, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, 2006-09](image)

Note: Data refer to median household income (US), median income of those earning income (CA), gross household income of at least AUD10,000 (AU), and median weekly income of those aged at least 15 (NZ), with the position of each group expressed as a proportion of the dominant group (100). Some individuals may belong to more than one group.

Economic inequality appears to be strongly characteristic of the relationship between indigenous peoples and the locally dominant group. Census data illustrate the extent to which the former occupy a distinctive niche in the labour force. It is extremely difficult to make systematic cross-national comparisons, but an effort is made to do so in figure 6. Rather than using occupation, this employs an alternative measure—income level—in four countries for the most recent year for which data are available. In each case, an effort is made to make internal comparisons by comparing other groups with the dominant one (non-Hispanic whites in the USA, English speakers in Canada, and the non-indigenous population in Australia and New Zealand). A surprising gap opens up between the two North American cases (where the indigenous groups have income levels about 40% lower than the dominant groups) and the two in Oceania, where the gap is much less (about 20%). But comparison of this kind is hazardous, since different measurement instruments are used in the different cases, and income transfers from public sources have an effect for which it is hard to control. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the “real” difference in status between indigenous and dominant peoples is less than indicated here; indeed, it may be much greater.

Many other indicators of well-being (such as infant mortality, life expectancy, access to education and involvement in prestigious social positions) are likely to show indigenous peoples as relatively deprived, but with great variation from one people to another in the size of the gap by which it lags behind the dominant group. But in many cases the gap has also been narrowing over time, with the socio-economic profile of the “typical” member of the indigenous population coming to resemble more closely that of the “typical” member of the dominant group.

The subjective dimension

From the perspective of the mobilisation of indigenous peoples, one of the most important questions has to do with the consequences of the factors just discussed, and of change in these—the impact of cultural values and socio-economic status on self-perception, and perception of the group. In reviewing this, it is important to begin by noting one remarkable feature of ethnic mobilisation. Other things being equal, one might expect ethnic consciousness to increase in tandem with cultural distinctiveness. It is indeed true that in many European cases language revival movements and political nationalist movements went hand-in-hand: the Finnish, Estonian, Latvian, Czech and Bulgarian movements are examples. But there are also cases where the rise of nationalism coincides with a decline in cultural distinctiveness. Ireland is an example. It was precisely as the decline of the Irish language escalated in the nineteenth century that political nationalism peaked. Elsewhere in western Europe (but not in eastern Europe) there are parallel examples, where the language of nationalist or regionalist mobilisation is the metropolitan one, not the indigenous one (Scotland, Brittany, and to some extent Wales and the Basque Country are examples).

This pattern has important implications for the political mobilisation of indigenous peoples. Demands for reform may extend to the cultural domain (in such areas as symbolic or occasionally substantive improvement in the condition of the indigenous language). But even where indigenous elites have little interest in cultural questions, there is no reason to assume that rapid cultural assimilation of indigenous peoples will be an impediment to political mobilisation. On the contrary, in the manner of classical nationalist movements, it is precisely as educated but excluded indigenous elites emerge in the context of enhanced contact with the dominant community that the motivation for political mobilisation is likely to be at its greatest.

Yet, the pattern of political mobilisation of indigenous peoples is extraordinarily mixed. It ranges from such cases as Bolivia (with an indigenous President, Evo Morales) to the USA (with a small, divided and marginalised indigenous population). In between, we encounter varying degrees of mobilisation. Even if this involves the bulk of the indigenous population, this population is usually too small to have much impact at national level. In many cases, however, as in New Zealand, Canada and Scandinavia, there is a considerable level of institutional recognition of indigenous peoples, offering an additional forum for political
mobilisation. The paucity of comparative studies of this process is perhaps attributable to its extraordinary complexity, a complexity that will become clear from even a quick glance at the major international survey of minorities and indigenous peoples (Minority Rights Group, 2010).

CONCLUSION

We may conclude by summarising the importance of indigenous standing in inter-ethnic competition for status and resources (economic, social and political) by means of a paradoxical sentence. Not all peoples who are indigenous are indigenous peoples. There are, in other words, two meanings to the word “indigenous” in this context. Many nations which dominate particular states justify this dominance by reference to their “indigenous” status—they were the “original” inhabitants, and therefore entitled to priority. Similar claims are made by many national minorities, or marginalised ethnic groups. The claim can be a very important ideological weapon in the struggle for control over contested territories, and we can cite many examples—the battles between Israelis and Palestinians as already mentioned, between Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, or between Magyars and Romanians in Transylvania. Voices will even be found in Northern Ireland arguing that Ulster Protestants, substantially descended from English and Scottish settlers, were in fact the original inhabitants—they had been expelled to Scotland in prehistoric times, but moved back in the seventeenth century (see, for example, Adamson, 1974).

But “indigenous” peoples in this sense, if their claims are to be admitted, are not necessarily “indigenous peoples” of the kind recognised by the UN (pre-colonial populations which answer to Martínez’s definition). Such groups have distinctive, well-recognised characteristics, and particular economic, social and political needs. They may lack the demographic resources to fight their corner, and they may be embittered by the extent to which treaties and agreements—if they even existed—have been broken by the dominant partner. Furthermore, such breaches may have been relatively recent, still present in intergenerational memory. Though lacking in power resources, indigenous peoples may be able to fall back on ideological ones. The undermining of indigenous culture and assimilation of indigenous peoples is unlikely to be fully successful unless the group is dispersed; and, notwithstanding the extent of intermarriage, sufficient phenotypical difference may survive to facilitate group consciousness. Especially if a particular indigenous people has receded in size to such an extent that it can no longer be seen as a threat, the dominant community may be able to afford the luxury of symbolic generosity (even if this extends no further than an apology). But if such a people is of medium size and is politically mobilised in a democratically organised state, it may be able to achieve something more substantial than symbolic recognition—at least an element of collective autonomy, and protection of its resources. In this, the main contribution of the international community is likely to be in the area of sharing information, promoting cross-national contact, heightening consciousness of abuses, and offering at least a limited framework or model for reform. The main contribution of the scholarly community may well be simply to draw attention to the importance of monitoring similarities between the experience of indigenous peoples and that of other ethnic minorities—similarities that bring their own warning about the realities of the political world.

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