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RESPONSE TO EDITORIAL

Response to *aborigine, Indian, indigenous or first nations?* By Michael Peters and Carl Mika

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Michael Peters and Carl Mika have succinctly reviewed the concept of 'indigenous' and related words, used as identity labels of ethnicity for 'tribal peoples' and their cultures. They have provided a useful synopsis of the status of 'indigenous' in official discursive frameworks, especially of the UN, and in the sociohistorical trajectories of several countries, especially Australia and Canada. Their chosen title parades four of the biggest terms used in different times and places for these ethnicity groups. In their first paragraph they acknowledge that these terms 'have become increasingly problematic' and follow this by stating that the terms have been 'derogatory, historically inaccurate and contaminated by a colonial past based on the demeaning notion of "primitive" peoples with its assumption of western cognitive superiority'. But I would suggest that this problem of evolutionist origin is not the only problem with the term 'indigenous' and cognates. As Peters and Mika note, it is not an indigenous word. Their finding: 'There is no accepted official definition of "indigenous" adopted by any UN-system body because of the diversity of indigenous peoples' is the perfect illustration of the 'problematic' nature of the concept of 'indigenous' as used in such contexts.

Peters and Mika include a quote stating that 'Indigenous is largely relational' but omit any discussion of the implications of this assertion, leaving a thread, perhaps, for others (including me) to pick up and follow. To say that indigenous is 'relational' is to recognise that the concept of 'indigenous' has little if any positive cognitive content. Relationality points to a shared history of relationship between peoples, which is specific to time and place in the many, many intercultural contexts of global history. Such diversity and specificity by definition cannot be 'generalised' by the use of a term such as indigenous, aboriginal, etc. By these lights, the concept of 'indigenous' is therefore a contradiction in terms: a one-word conundrum; a paradox. It is imperative to recognise this paradoxical nature of the concept of indigenous, in order to fully understand it, and be able to deploy it for indigenous purposes.

Given the global dominance of the Western (or Euro–American) culture, the term 'indigenous' has been largely used to mean something like 'non-Western' in settler countries such as the CANZUS group, comprising Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the US. As such, it is a term that only arises in relation/ response to a dominant ethnic group. In Aotearoa-New Zealand, this relationality between the Western and the indigenous takes the form of the Pākehā–Māori relationship. Like ethnicity itself, indigeneity only appears in the context of the history of a specific colonising (i.e. power) relationship between two (or more) ethnic groups of people. The meaning of the concept 'indigenous' is therefore political rather than epistemic: it facilitates strategic alliance between different indigenous peoples, such as those of the CANZUS countries, working together to mutual advantage.

Peters and Mika point out that terms such as 'indigenous' are often seen as 'offensive to tribal groups especially when used in an international, totalizing and universal way'. In closing, to leave another thread for picking up later, I would note that in my experience, Western scholars often

become confused by the traps hiding within the concept of indigenous—and even the most well-meaning and/or world-leading expert, if he is confused and lacks understanding of the terms he is using, will offend those he is speaking about, no matter how much 'respect' he thinks he is showing them.

ARTICLE HISTORY