Indigeneity and autochthony: a couple of false twins?

The term indigenous tends to be used for people who are already marginalised, while autochthonous is generally reserved for people who are dominant in a given area but fear future marginalisation. Anthropologists often sympathise with the former, while being highly critical of the latter, although a bitter debate opposes opponents and proponents of indigeneity and autochthony. We argue that the implicit criteria used in this debate need to be discussed explicitly if one wants to escape from the dead end in which the discussion finds itself today.

Key words indigeneity, autochthony, self-determination, colonialism, xenophobia

Introduction

Peoples regarded as ‘indigenous’ have fascinated anthropologists since the birth of the discipline, the latter being the product not only of 19th-century colonialism but also of increasing concern for the direction industrialising society was taking and an intense interest in other social possibilities. Students today are still drawn to the discipline by such concerns and interests; and depictions of certain groups (Native Americans, Pygmies, etc.) as living in ways supposedly untouched by industrial society, or as under threat by this society, continue to play a role in drawing people to studying social anthropology at university (Béteille 1998: 187).

Many anthropologists have become personally involved – as researchers, advocates or expert witnesses in courts, or through participation in non-governmental organisations (NGOs), development projects, governmental agencies or international conferences – in defending or questioning the rights of indigenous peoples (Barnard 2006). Despite being exposed to dispossession, marginalisation, assimilation or even genocide, the latter are now achieving an increasing visibility and recognition, at least in international circles (Oldham and Frank 2008). The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, references to indigenous peoples in diverse UN treaties, the International Decade(s) of the World’s Indigenous Peoples, are all presented as attempts to take into consideration their problems and redress past wrongs. Moreover, in the context of increasing environmental degradation in the world, many indigenous people are now frequently praised by a range of commentators for their environmental concern,
consciousness and knowledge, and presented as models to be followed by industrial societies. Whether described as sentinels of the earth (Malaurie 1999), ecocentrists living in harmony with nature (Sessions 1994), not making a division between nature and culture (Ingold 2000), or simply treating their environment in subjective and relational rather than objective and exploitative terms (Bird-David 1993; Milton 2002), their depiction often appears to echo Rousseau’s innocent Noble Savage (Ellen 1986; Redford 1991; but see Ellingson 2001). Despite this (or perhaps because of it) national governments and international conservation organisations, backed by international environmental treaties, tend in practice to appropriate these same peoples’ lands, supposedly for environmental reasons. These developments have made ‘indigeneity’ a central issue for contemporary social anthropology.

However, it is far from being the case that a disciplinary consensus exists about the rights of indigenous peoples or indeed about the very notion of indigeneity itself. In the first place, the definition and the relevance of the term is the subject of ongoing and vigorous debate. The co-existence of indigeneity with other related concepts, such as autochthony, makes the discussions even more complicated. Secondly, anthropologists often criticise each other in (perhaps unusually) critical terms when debating the question of indigeneity or autochthony, and more or less explicit accusations of neo-liberalism, neo-colonialism, racism or even fascism are not uncommon. The heated nature of the debate shows that we are dealing with a deep divide within anthropology, one that reaches to the very foundations of our discipline.

Indigeneity and indigenous peoples

The etymology of the term ‘indigenous’ refers to the native or original inhabitants of a country or area. Indigenous people are commonly regarded as being the first inhabitants of a given territory, or at least to have occupied it prior to successive waves of settlers. In fighting for the rights that would accompany a recognition of their historical and ongoing dispossession by nation-states (and in particular by states that resulted from European colonisation), they often resort to arguing for the recognition of the distinctiveness of their social, cultural, economic and political characteristics with respect to those of the dominant societies in which they live. Indigenous peoples constitute an important challenge for contemporary nation-states, demanding acknowledgement of the ongoing histories of appropriation on which the power of state institutions and social hierarchies are built (see for example Adamczyk, this volume). However, their claims for self-determination are rarely claims for independence (Asch 1992). As a result, they challenge the very idea of the modern nation-state itself, through refusing to give primacy to the territorial- or descent-based notions of identity at the core of nation-states’ claims to legitimacy and, therefore, also underpinning modern international political arrangements (Iveson et al. 2000).

Historically speaking, indigenous peoples are often descendants of populations inhabiting areas that have been settled by others. Most have been dispossessed and pushed to the fringes of the resources that they once relied on. Indigenous peoples thus occupy today a marginal and minority position within nation-states. When looking at the list of peoples recognised as ‘indigenous’ by the United Nations, one finds a clear preponderance of nomadic people, whose ways of life are often questioned and challenged by the states in which they live.
This list of criteria – primo-occupants, culturally distinctive, claiming self-determination, dispossessed, marginalised – highlights at least two significant problems. First, many peoples officially recognised as ‘indigenous’ do not meet all of the UN criteria, while many groups meeting most of these criteria are not recognised as ‘indigenous’. The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues has decided not to adopt any formal definition and to present self-identification as the ultimate criterion. Indigenous people are therefore, ultimately, those who claim to be indigenous – a solution that is as satisfactory as one could imagine within the current nation-state-dominated international ‘constitution’. Second, it is problematic to have the recognition of indigenous people controlled by an international body whose legitimacy and power is derived from the primacy of a conception of the nation-state challenged by the continued existence of indigenous groups.

The arguments advanced by many seeking to support indigenous peoples’ rights – with their emphasis on maintaining cultural, political or economic distinctiveness and on seeking self-determination within a nation-state framework – are not unproblematic. Firstly, does the solution really lie in asserting a supposed distinctiveness (that nevertheless has to resemble that of other indigenous peoples) rather than in addressing the similar ways in which colonialism dispossesses people the world over (see Kenrick, this volume)? Secondly, the collective aspect of these claims raises other questions. How is group membership defined (Niezen 2003)? A definition in terms of cultural criteria (such as language) is problematic where cultural assimilation has been occurring. Those who defend this line of argument have been accused of essentialising cultural difference and of being oblivious or opposed to processes of social and cultural change. Defining indigenous membership according to descent has been compared to the 1935 Nuremberg Laws introduced by the Nazis which first distinguished between ‘Germans’ and ‘Jews’ and then stripped Jews of their German citizenship, a process with eerie parallels in present-day Canada and Australia where the state uses descent to define who is, and is not, indigenous (Kuper 2003: 392). Thirdly, since collective consensus very rarely involves unanimity, dissent can be exploited to question the validity of collective indigenous claims. Moreover, some anthropologists understand political and economic self-determination for a given group as meaning that non-group members are excluded from having access to its resources and from participating in decision-making. This may appear incompatible with a national ideology of equality between all citizens, and lead to accusations of discriminatory discourses and practices (Kuper 2003: 395). Finally, some argue that defending traditional political structures can also lead to supporting unelected, corrupt and despotic leaders ruling by right of birth, and thus shoring up feudal dictatorship instead of modern democracy.

Against this background, the response of many anthropologists has been to support marginalised peoples to claim ‘indigenous’ status as one of the few political and legal avenues open to them to stop more powerful actors from further dominating and dispossessing them (Saugestad 2001). These anthropologists argue that any group identity is constructed and that the key question is whether people are able to construct their identity themselves or are forced to adopt an identity others have constructed for them (see Adamczyk, this volume). Acknowledging that the definition of membership can be difficult, they argue that this problem is often created by colonial and post-colonial legal systems that are based on individual rights and unable to cope with the logic of collective customary rights, forcing indigenous people to resolve the issue of individual membership as defined by these systems (see Kenrick, this volume). Thus,
it is often the dominant society and its legal apparatus defining identity as a right of birth that forces indigenous people to refer to descent or even genetics in order to have a chance to win back part of what has been lost through colonisation. The accusation of racism should therefore be aimed at national States instead of indigenous people. Recognising individual property and inheritance (which is also based on descent and/or genetics) while rejecting the validity of collective property and inheritance is arguably akin to a form of cultural imperialism, or even of neo-liberalism (wishing to impose the centrality of the individual in all social processes), and can arguably be used to legitimise brutal and unjust processes of marginalisation, dispossession and exploitation (Solway 2006). Those identifying with and supporting the struggles of indigenous peoples favour the decentralisation of power (Blaser et al. 2004). While accepting that indigenous leaders should not be idealised, they argue that many of these leaders are much more accountable to their people than corrupt, despotic and badly elected national leaders and governments, or than completely unelected and effectively unaccountable international institutions such as the World Bank. Finally, anthropologists supporting indigenous movements believe that past and present wrongs need to be righted, either by giving back (part of) what has been stolen or by policies of positive discrimination to give marginalised people a fairer chance of accessing education and employment. According to this line of argument, indigenous people are better understood as those who are discriminated against; they are rarely the ones discriminating against others (Kenrick and Lewis 2004).

And so goes the debate, with one side discrediting indigenous movements by highlighting examples of apparently racist and xenophobic claims, while the other argues in favour of indigenous movements by giving examples of indigenous peoples who have been dispossessed and marginalised (not to mention those who have been exterminated).

**Autochthony and indigeneity**

In addition to the debate on indigeneity, we have also witnessed over recent years the increasing prevalence of the concept of autochthony within anthropological research. The etymology of this term refers to the earth. Autochthonous people are anchored in their territory, from which they are said to originate. The term is often presented, including within United Nations circles, as synonymous with indigenous. Indigeneity and autochthony have in common a reference to a supposed primo-occupancy and cultural specificity as a basis for specific rights, the latter often linked either to controlling access to a resource or territory or to maintaining cultural specificity, leading in many cases to demands for self-determination. Another similarity is the nature of the anthropological debate surrounding both concepts, characterised by a division between, on the one hand, those who defend indigenous or autochthonous claims on the grounds that these are just and try to redress previous (or current) wrongs and, on the other, those who are against such claims on the grounds that they are discriminatory and xenophobic.

The use of these concepts tends, nevertheless, to remain distinct. The anthropologists who talk about indigeneity are usually not the same as those who talk about autochthony. The term indigenous is generally used to refer either to hunter-gatherers and nomads whose livelihood and culture is threatened by encroachment from their
neighbours and state (such is the case for the Pygmies, San and African pastoralist nomads, or for the tribal populations of India), or to groups who occupied a territory before it was forcibly settled by colonising powers and have struggled ever since to maintain some control over what was left of their resources and to assert their socio-cultural specificity (such as the Maori of New Zealand, the Australian Aboriginal Peoples, Native Americans, or South American Indians). On the other hand, the term autochthonous is more often used with reference to agricultural or industrial populations, who are not necessarily marginal, but rather believe that their resources, culture or power are threatened by ‘migrants’. Examples can be found either within national borders, as is the case when ‘original’ members of an area or town feel threatened by the migration of their neighbours and want to ‘protect’ themselves from a process of encroachment, as it is increasingly the case in Sub-Saharan Africa (see Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000; Geschiere 2009; Gausset 2008; Hilgers, this volume), but also in the Europe of the regions (see Ceuppens, this volume) – or at the international level, when the ‘original’ citizens of one country feel threatened by migration from other countries and believe that they will end up ‘colonised’ unless they stop that trend (as can be heard in the debate about migration in European countries). Thus, the term indigenous tends to be used for people who are already marginalised, while autochthonous is generally reserved for people who are dominant in a given area but fear future marginalisation (see for example Bayart et al. 2001). The response of anthropologists to these groups has also differed: they have tended to display sympathy and support for indigenous peoples (such as marginalised nomads) while often being highly critical of those advancing autochthonous claims (for example, extreme right-wing parties in European countries, see Ceuppens, this volume). While indigenous movements are often idealised as innocent victims, or even as globally concerned and ecologically sound, autochthonous movements are, on the contrary, demonised and their agenda is reduced to ‘the exclusion of supposed “strangers” and the unmasking of “fake” autochthonous, who are often citizens of the same nation-state’ (Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005: 385).

The legitimacy of indigenous and autochthonous claims

Opponents of indigeneity and autochthony tend to use case studies to show that these concepts can be cynically exploited to gain undue privileges and to exclude others from benefiting from them. Proponents of indigeneity and autochthony use a range of case studies to show that these concepts can help to redress past injustices and help to stop the exclusion of some of the world’s poorest and most marginalised people from the benefits that have been gained by others at their expense. It is difficult not to be persuaded by the case studies given by both sides. As a result, all indigenous or autochthonous movements cannot be discredited on the grounds that the claims of some are unacceptable, nor can all of these movements be accredited on the grounds that the legitimacy of some is unquestionable. Certain claims seem, nevertheless, to be stronger than others, but on what basis? Clearly, cultural difference or the historical occupancy of a territory are not enough to gain sympathy for a given cause, however central they might be in court cases. There are other criteria at play, but what are they?
Is an indigenous or autochthonous claim more legitimate when it aims at promoting cultural diversity and less legitimate when a group tries to impose its own cultural standards on others? Does its legitimacy depend on whether it promotes tolerance for difference or instead cultivates hate and exclusion of the other? Is it legitimate when it claims self-determination as a universal human right and illegitimate when it tries to restrict this right to some and deny it to others? Is it legitimate when it tries to redress past wrongs and illegitimate when it tries to perpetuate them? Is it the poverty and political marginalisation of a group that makes its claims legitimate? Do indigenous and autochthonous claims need to aim at more equality in order to be legitimate?

These criteria are often implicit in the debate between opponents and proponents of indigeneity and autochthony, and they need to be discussed explicitly if we are to escape from the dead end in which the debate arguably finds itself today. But even if anthropologists agreed that the legitimacy of a claim depends on whether it promotes cultural diversity, pluralism, tolerance, justice, the alleviation of poverty, and so on, they would still face a number of problems. How could they measure the tolerance or the racism, the reciprocity or the double standards, the inclusion or exclusion inherent in a claim? How could they make sure, for example, that a public discourse asserting equality would not be used to maintain structural inequalities at another level (on how anthropologists might begin answering such questions, see Carrithers 2005)? How can they dissociate the questions of equality and of cultural similarity (or inequality and difference)? Should it even be the role of anthropologists – and if so, in what circumstances – to decide on the legitimacy or otherwise of competing claims expressed in terms of indigeneity of autochthony? These are some of the questions that need to be answered by anthropologists if they want to continue working successfully with the concepts of indigeneity and autochthony.

In this volume, we present four articles that discuss the use and misuse of autochthony and indigeneity in different settings. Hilgers shows how claims to autochthony are instrumentalised to access (or exclude others from) power and rights in Burkina Faso. Thus, autochthony is not given at birth, but rather is built up through various strategies and is the object of a constant renegotiation, fluctuating according to power balances and the regional or national political context. Along the same lines, Ceupens shows how autochthony becomes central to a certain political discourse that instrumentalises it to control who accesses (and is excluded from) power and rights in Flanders. Here again, those excluded from such discourses can either accept the tenets of this discourse and try to acquire autochthonous characteristics in order to access power and rights, or they can oppose an alternative discourse based on equality of rights supposedly found at a higher level, among all fellow national citizens. These two articles, one on Africa, the other on Europe, both adopt a critical perspective on autochthony and focus more on how such discourses are used to exclude others. This perspective is counter-balanced by the next two articles (again one on Africa and one on Europe), which focus instead on how autochthony can be used to redress past injustices and access equal rights without necessarily excluding others. Adamczyk argues that, in Rwanda, the post-genocidal obligation to talk about ‘Rwandese’ and consequent prohibition on referring to autochthony or ethnicity (i.e. talking about ‘Hutu’, ‘Tutsi’ or ‘Twa’) helps hide the economic and political marginalisation of the Twa, and makes it difficult for them to organise themselves in order to claim equal rights and opportunities with the dominant groups. But it also shows that such a fight for equal rights need not depend on being autochthonous and can just as well be framed in other terms, as long as the latter...
encompass the discriminated group and capture the historical marginalisation to which they are subjected. Yet, although they develop along another line than autochthony, they still take as a point of departure some difference among fellow citizens, which makes it suspect in the eyes of a state trying to build unity and homogeneity. Finally, Kenrick analyses the Scottish indigenous movement as ‘an attempt to return local control to local people, primarily through acknowledging histories of dispossession, and challenging the “special privileges” powerful interests have accrued through the violent histories of (internal and external) colonial expansion’. Far from being racist and aiming at excluding others, it defines itself as part of a democratic movement aiming to achieve more self-determination and resisting political hegemony. The four articles exemplify some of the difficulties that anthropologists meet when dealing with indigeneity or autochthony and the way it is politically instrumentalised, either as a way to secure privileges and exclude others, or as a way to fight for equal rights, self-determination or redress past wrongs. It might be time to end the sterile debate in terms of ‘for or against’ the concepts of autochthony and indigeneity, and to focus instead on the context and legitimacy of the different political projects that instrumentalise them. This shift of focus might do much to reconcile anthropologists, both with themselves and with the people they study.

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