



Indigeneous peoples and the Environment - An Introduction

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Introduction

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Indigenous peoples and the environment are obviously two complex, two multiple notions: but it seems striking that when they are examined together, when one looks at the long history of their relationships, one is confronted to two widespread and opposed simplifications, to what I would call an interpretative double bind that could be expressed in terms of literary figures: “indigenous peoples and the environment” too often reads either as a pleonasm, or as an oxymoron, both of which seeming to be highly strategic, part of an economic, political and ideological agenda.

A pleonasm first, in the idea that indigenous peoples are one and the same with their environment. In the context of colonisation, imperial powers have contributed to build and reinforce the idea of the state of nature of indigenous peoples, of the coincidence between themselves and their Mother Earth – we can give the example of Fénelon in *The Adventures of Telemachus*, a paradigm of many such texts in 19th century travel literature: “On our arrival upon this coast we found there a savage race who lived by hunting and by the fruits which the trees spontaneously produced.”¹ In *Orientalism*, published in 1978, Edward Saïd exposed such naturalisation as a myth, as a Western and Nor-

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1. François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, Encounter with the Mandurians, in Chapter IX of *Telemachus, son of Ulysses*, translated by Patrick Riley (Cambridge University Press, [1699] 1994), p. 130.

thern construct, and he denounced the long tradition of false and romanticized images of the Primitivism of indigenous peoples – images that have contributed to relegate them to nature versus culture, to geography versus history, and that have strategically served as implicit justification for colonial and imperial ambitions and interventions.

An oxymoron as well, that has been thoroughly analysed by Mark Dowie in his book published in 2009: *Conservation refugees: The hundred-Year Conflict between Global Conservation and Native Peoples*. Indeed, for more than a century, probably dating back to the creation of the Yosemite Valley national park and the eviction of a small band of Miwok natives who had settled in the valley about 4000 years before, there has been a harsh and enduring conflict between transnational conservation and the worldwide movement of indigenous peoples. As Dowie develops, this has been due “mostly to conflicting views of nature, radically different definitions of “wilderness,” and profound misunderstandings of each other’s perspectives on science and culture. (...) The result of this century-old conflict is thousands of unmanageable protected areas, and an intractable debate over who holds the key to successful conservation in the most biologically rich areas of the world” (Dowie ix). The separation between Indigenous Peoples and their Environment over the past century has been spectacular: according to Dowie’s publisher, “since 1900, more than 108.000 officially protected conservation areas have been established worldwide largely at the urging of the five major international conservation organizations.”² About half of these areas were occupied or regularly used by indigenous peoples, and though figures may vary, it is estimated that the number of people displaced from traditional homelands in the interest of Conservation is close to 20 millions, 14 millions of them in Africa alone³. There are people fighting the oxymoron though, and the following articles examine these efforts: a new generation of conservationists realise that the very landscapes they seek to protect actually owe their high biodiversity to the millenary practises of the peoples who have lived there, and that there is a necessity to create a new conservation paradigm, together with indigenous peoples.

Such double bind, a difficult balance between pleonasm and oxymoron, is probably an effect of the intellectual difficulty there is in considering together these two notions, because they are so multiple, and notably because they oscillate between the general and the specific, the local and the global. “Indigenous” means, as a general definition, someone who was born in the place

2. Marc Dowie’s Publisher, backcover.

3. Marc Dowie develops that point in his presentation of his book in *The Guardian*, in an article titled « Clash of cultures. The conflict between conservation and indigeneous peoples in wild landscapes » (Wed. 3rd, June, 2009)

where he lives, but more specifically, it designates the peoples who inhabited a land before it was conquered by colonial societies and who consider themselves to be distinct from those societies. The two definitions raise the question of the link between origin and legitimacy, but they raise it from a very different perspective – indeed, one may want, theoretically, to question a vision of the world in terms of identities, territories and legitimacy, and thus to question the very pertinence of the notion of “indigenusness”; but this would amount to neglecting the political question of actual dispossession, and of discriminatory practises. In the same way, the environment is both *local*, the local environment of local peoples, who have managed ancestral land for centuries through ancestral knowledge, and *global*, the environment as planetary – and the respective interests are obviously conflicting.

An easy way out would thus be the general way, the idea that we are all equally indigenous to the planet, and that we could try to redefine identities in terms of multiplicity, deterritorialisation, and circulations. But this new journal, *Elohi—Indigenous People and the Environment*, will daringly undertake to examine the variety of multiple local situations, in a collective effort to clarify and construct that essential link.

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