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Between Spectacle and Politics: Indigenous Singularities

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In solidarity with the French speaking Native Americans from Quebec who define themselves as *autochtones* (autochthonous, "from the land"), UNESCO has adopted a protocol to use this translation of the word Indigenous instead of the French *indigène* in all its declarations and publications. The use of the latter word is thought politically incorrect because of its old colonial use. But some non-governmental organisations (NGOs), whose agendas are to defend the rights of Indigenous peoples, prefer the French expression "*peuples indigènes*", ("Indigenous peoples") to insist on their special status. A French militant reappropriation of the word "*indigène*" emerged in a different context with the Indigènes de la République movement ("Indigenous People of the Republic") which was setup in reaction to a French law that was passed in 2005 requiring schools to teach the supposed "benefits of colonisation".[1] Protests from French historians and anthropologists, as well as many petitions convinced the then president, Jacques Chirac, to abrogate this article of the new law, shortly after "riots" had erupted in the suburbs of Paris and other big French cities; the actors in this civil unrest were essentially young French people whose parents or grandparents were part of the African colonial or postcolonial immigration to France.[2]

At the United Nations, the expression "Indigenous peoples" (*peuples autochtones* in French) tends only to designate those colonised people who identify themselves and are identified as such on the basis of their original economy, based on subsistence activities such as hunting, gathering,

horticulture and grazing with an often holistic and sacred vision of the earth, and who found themselves a minority in their own lands. These criteria seem to correspond to thousands of language groups spread across the globe, representing at least 6% of the population. Their claim to be granted status as sovereign peoples has been discussed at the UN for over thirty years while their ways of life, whether in Amazonia, in Siberia, in Mongolia or in the Kalahari desert, are threatened by state violence, or by forestry and mining companies. The UN recognition of the status of "Indigenous peoples" in Africa relates to Tuaregs, Berbers, Bushmen, Pygmies, Peuls and Masai, but excludes ethnic groups who practice agriculture or who were historically displaced, that is, the majority of the continent. In North America, Australia and New Zealand many Indigenous people now live in cities or old reserves that have become self-managed communities. Within the same families, the social achievement of some—through art, education, sport, social action or politics—contrasts with the despair and suicidal distress of others. Nevertheless, those who succeed generally claim their indigeneity and the right to cultural and legal recognition of their difference as the first Australians; they struggle politically to bring to light the specificity of the problems that affect the communities they come from.[3] Some play with diverse discursive strategies about their relationship with nature, for instance accepting the role of ecological custodians, in order to attempt to recover a public-spirited and economically fair model of governance.[4]

Indigenous peoples also aim to control the representation of their cultures by anthropologists, museums and the media. The Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP), which has been meeting since 1982 at the UN in Geneva to define universal standards for human rights, was instrumental in bringing to the fore the issue of intellectual property rights regarding Indigenous knowledge and practices and the question of the status and destiny of the products of anthropological research. Aboriginal Australians joined delegations of Native Americans from the United States and Canada, Maori from New Zealand, and Sami from Finland and Sweden, following their opposition to petroleum drilling in the community of Noonkanbah, located in the remote northwest of the continent in 1980. At that time, I was conducting field research in the region for my doctoral thesis. Thus, I had the opportunity to witness the incredible intertribal solidarity that was demonstrated on that occasion. Protests occurred all over Australia with the support of unions, ecological movements and political parties opposed to multinational mining companies. Aboriginal groups travelled hundreds of kilometres to give their support to the people of Noonkanbah:

Warlpiri initiates from the Lajamanu community on the edge of the Tanami desert brought their fire ceremony used to settle disputes. The Noonkanbah resistors gave them a boy to initiate in exchange. Alliances that existed traditionally were thus reactualised by being anchored in the politics of the State. Such a process is not only the result of a response to colonisation, but also demonstrates that the ritual function among Aboriginal people—and probably elsewhere—always consisted in reworking the past in relation to the present. Because of the refusal of some colleagues in France and Australia to recognize the dynamism of societies that are modulated by myths and rituals, the spectre of people wrongly defined as "without history" (Wolf 1982) continues to haunt our disciplines.

This book sets out to confront this "malaise of civilisation" born out of the history of our concepts: Indigenous agency "disturbs" because it challenges a dominant paradigm that predominantly treats Indigenous peoples as mere victims of history. This book is entitled *The Challenge of Indigenous Peoples* as an attempt to demonstrate the contrary. Our starting point was that a certain current of Western social science is politically uneasy with the idea that people can assert themselves as agents of their own destinies. The return of neo-evolutionism has generated an atmosphere of cynicism and denigration of the initiatives of *empowerment* and the identity reconstructions of any group that is socially disadvantaged, marginalised or dissident; especially migrants, refugees, illegal immigrants, cultural or religious minorities, and also peoples who became minorities in their own territories because of encompassment by colonial states, as has happened to most of the first inhabitants of any land. Actors oppressed by history, victims of social as well as structural discrimination, often see themselves denied the recognition of agency, as a mode of existential self-sufficiency in terms of their actions and their interactions with their physical, economic and political environment. The difficulty of translating to French with one word the process of giving oneself a power that is recognized by others ("agency" in English) indicates that we find it hard to think in any language what we are not used to saying.[5] It is an important part of the work of deconstruction of a framework of thinking which is limiting, biased and excluding, to investigate the cultural and cognitive impact of language.

Our anthropological challenge here is to produce a dynamic relativism that constantly associates local singularities and refracts them in a diversity of creative performances that can move us globally. The challenge is to conceive that in our many different expressions of being in the world we can weave a complex social fabric, with horizontal networks that merge or diverge

singularisations, rather than destroying them vertically in the name of economic domination, violence, war and the law of revenge. Anthropology attempts to show the relevance of a certain relativity of world views which are carried through words, symbols and images but also through other human expressions that cannot be reduced to them. It is a search for tools for making cognitive or affective connections that will allow us to make all expressions resonate with one another so they can operate together. In each language, the choice of some terms used to define identities and characterise the social impact of the relevant actors is a challenge because the context of reception and diffusion of these words implies different forms of perception and representation. To advocate a generalised contextual relativism can prevent all communication or produce stigmatisations when the everyday words of some become sources of hurt for others. On the other hand, to pretend to a common language that could be substituted for all others always opens a gap, risking misinterpretation of the subtle and the complex or their reduction to a simplistic understanding. Apart from words and images, we are looking here at what ritual, artistic or political performances convey not only through symbols and icons, but also through direct, intuitive and sensory-motor perception: it is what, in line with Francisco Varela, neurophysiologists and other specialists of movement and perception define as an "enactive complexity" characteristic of human interactions with multimodal interfaces.

The first part of this book analyses different Australian situations in an attempt to circumscribe the paradigm of Aboriginal people, icons of the oldest civilization of the planet, whose contemporary art and "reticular" world view, expressed through their concepts of Dreaming pathways and the semi-nomadic way of life, seem strikingly current (Glowczewski 2011). The Western Desert social practice and ontology of nomadism and anchoring are presented by Stéphane Lacam-Gitareu (Chapter 2) who, in the middle of the 1990s, followed young Aboriginal people who were always on the road. He shows us the despair attached to their Indigenous status: how finding themselves torn between two worlds led them to reconstitute their nomadic being in networks of alliance as they wandered across the Western Desert. An example of a regional reappropriation of their culture and art by the Yolngu people—through a database regrouping their collections scattered in museums of Australia or Europe—is given by Jessica De Largy Healy (Chapter 3), who worked for two years to help establish one of the first Aboriginal Knowledge Centres, in the Galiwin'ky Island

community of Arnhem Land, where language and ritual are still very much alive. Anke Tonnaer (Chapter 4) analyses historical changes and the dynamic of gender in the reenactment of the aeroplane dance performed at a festival in Borroloola; Martin Préaud (Chapter 5) compares two theatrical plays which were directed with Aboriginal people: one stages the pre-European contact with seasonal trepang fisherman from Indonesia (Macassar) in Arnhem Land, the other reconstructs a massacre of the Kija people in the Kimberley. Arnaud Morvan (Chapter 6) reviews the reception of Indigenous Australian art in France during a period of over thirty years, analysing its militant impact with the example of Kija artists from Kimberley with whom he has worked for many years. Géraldine Le Roux (Chapter 7) analyses her experiences as a young anthropologist and curator, working with urban Aboriginal artists. She discusses their tactics for distributing their work, such as virtual exhibitions on the internet that allow them to network with Indigenous artists from Oceania or America. Wayne Jowandi Barker, Aboriginal composer and musician, recalls his experience of regional festivals and his interactions with audiences during tours in France and in Europe: the creative process nourished by his encounters with other world musicians is balanced against various expectations as to cultural authenticity (Chapter 8).

The second part of this collection widens the Indigenous problematic to a global scale considering questions of interpretation, appropriation of Indigenous representations, and the claim of the inalienability of cultural singularities. Various examples of these debates on the meaning of authenticity and notions of a continuously reconstructed cultural identity are given in two chapters dedicated to the Festival of Pacific Arts, the ninth hosted in 2004 by the population of the small sovereign island of Palau (Glowczewski & Henry, Chapter 9) and the first one organised in Fiji in 1972 (Kempf, Chapter 10). We argue that these gatherings, which some wrongly think of as mere cultural spectacles, constitute a strategy aimed at both affirming local singularities and weaving links of solidarity and alliances for sustainable development among societies threatened by the global economy, mining and sea pollution. In a similar way, Jari Kupiainien (Chapter 11) dissects the cultural and political issues of the first festival of Melanesian Arts and Culture, *Spirit Bilong Melanesia*, that was established in the Solomon Islands in 1998.

We also wanted to provide the reader with two examples that illustrate the political situation, the sufferings and creative responses of Indigenous peoples subjected to the dominant power of states other than those of

the West. The Adivasi from Jharkhand are administratively dependent on the state of India but, as Alexandre Soucaille demonstrates, some of their people are part of a global network of forest peoples (Chapter 12). As for the Khantys and Nenets from Siberia, they are subjected to the new laws of the Russian Federation. According to Dominique Samson Normand de Chambourg (Chapter 13), who has translated some of their books, the testimony by Khanty writers to the suffering and resistance of their people has found its place in contemporary literature. Finally, the concluding chapter by Rosita Henry contextualises this Indigenous performativity in terms of an analysis of its potential as a strategy of cultural resistance against the forces and ideological discourse of globalisation. Our point is not just to subsume the local within the global but to think about the originality of the models of Indigenous alterity that are claimed by these peoples, especially artists and activists, as an alternative network of alliances across the planet.

Notes

1 This movement mostly included people descended from inhabitants of old French African colonies or territories (Algeria, Tunisia, Senegal, etc.). Many other French citizens come from other parts of the globe: countries colonized by France who are now independent (such as Vietnam/ ex-Indochina, Haiti, Madagascar, Vanuatu/ex New Hebrides), or still remain under French rule with a mixed population including descendants of African slaves (Martinique, Guadeloupe, La Réunion, Mayotte) and Indigenous people: Kanaks from New Caledonia, Mao'hi from French Polynesia or Karib, Tupu-guarani and Arawak Indians from French Guyana. It is only recently that some activists from the latter countries decided to claim their indigeneity (autochtonie). For French people, whereas indigène was used in reference to any colonised population, the word autochtone is even more ambiguous; it is often understood in the philosophical sense of the ancient Greeks, as the status of any inhabitant of a country. Commonly used by Africanists for all African populations, it can also be used by any French people claiming a heritage with a place, especially in the regions where the Republican rule used to forbid the local languages to be spoken in school (Breton, Occitan or Basque).

2 Mucchielli, L. & V. Le Goazou (eds) (2007).

3 Ostenfeld, S., S. Le Queux & L. Reichard (2001).

4 See all the issues of the French journal Ethnies produced by Survival International France; Kolig and Mueckler (2002); Starn & (de la) Cadena (2007), Bosa & Wittersheim (eds) (2009); Gagné, Martin & Salaün (eds) (2009).

5 The French Canadian translation of agency, agencéité, is not commonly used in France and subject to misinterpretation with the word agentivité used in Actor Network Theory where agency is reduced to systematic action without the notion of empowerment (Latour 2004). On Agency debates see Ortner (2006) and Otto & Pedersen (eds) (2005).