MODERNITY AND INDIGENEITY

Price Phillips

INTRODUCTION

It is impossible to understand notions of indigenousness without first grasping genealogical processes of modernity. Although it is important to remember that indigenous communities themselves did not request it, the conception of indigeneity is fundamentally one held in dialectic opposition to modernity (O'Connor 2016, 27). Since this birth of indigeneity, and as indigenous groups increasingly receive national and legal guarantors of recognized privileges, social scientists have begun to answer questions over the material ties to indigeneity: Does adopting modes of modern technology make groups "less indigenous?" If indigenous groups convert to imported religions, do they lose credibility? (ibid.) Such questions gain access to the foundation of indigeneity not as a form of objective measurement but instead a call to an epochal and tangible moment in time. Echoing these sentiments in his analysis of the Haitian Revolution, anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that "the past does not exist independently from the present… The past—or more accurately, pastness—is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past as past" (Trouillot 2015, 15). Indigeneity operates using the same techniques as modernity itself: inseparable from our current paradigmatic positionality and understanding, though itself a material human product of history. While indigenous groups are inextricably tied to the historical point of reference that is their first contact with Europeans, a subject discussed later in this paper, such a point of reference necessarily exists in this contemporary moment, demanding contemporary comparison.

METHODOLOGY

To conduct my research, I uncover historical cases representing the contrapositions of established cases. In some of these cases, such as the Pomors in Russia, there is an absence of clearly defined or agreed upon victimization. Many are fighting to this day to be fully recognized as indigenous. This research draws from the descriptive methodology of performing indigeneity by Laura R. Graham and H. Glenn Penny (2014), as well as that of Catherine Baglo (2014), emphasizing the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches that exist and consistently emphasize agency,

Price Phillips is a Master's student enrolled in the Theory and History of International Relations Programme at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He attended The American University School of International Service from 2018-21, graduating with a degree in International Studies. His upcoming Masters's dissertation at the LSE investigates the relationship of evangelical megachurches to local political bodies in the American Midwest, where he spent 18 years growing up.

self-conscious practice, and reflexivity.

While it has been argued that the discursive construction of indigenous persons fits kindly within a compartment of modernity, there exist clear difficulties synthesizing the two. Whether it be an asymmetrical understanding of land and property rights across states and indigenous communities, control over natural resources, or efforts towards environmental sustainability, using metrics familiar to the modern international legal order when discussing indigenous persons frequently leads to inadvertent policy outcomes (Ahren 2016, Ch. 9). The question of how the nation-state can best treat indigenous groups has been thoroughly discussed at the international level, placated on a series of agreements and treatises assigning special rights and self-determination properties to indigenous groups (ibid., Ch. 6). As material rights granted to indigenous groups are more firmly implemented, the following question arises: how did the discourse of indigenousness come about?

Today, being marked as indigenous most often requires the qualifications detailed in the 1981 Cobo Report, a key component of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Cobo Report requires indigenous persons to have a "[h]istorical 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" (1981). Numerous anticolonial scholars have pointed out key oversights in the Cobo report, namely the failure of indigeneity to shift away from recognition as just another kinship-based identity system, comparable to "a nation, people, or tribe" (Bens 2020, 5). So, how should institutions regard indigenous persons? The answer lies in what Edward Said described as "humanist liberation," or a return to the historical understanding that is gained through institutions humanizing and historicizing those that they attempt to measure and compartmentalize (Makdisi 2005).

My research was complicated by uncovering historical anomalies from the norm of indigenousness remaining static upon European discovery. The first anomaly is the existence of various contemporary Afro-Indigenous groups in Latin America made up of communities of former slaves forcibly brought to Latin America, including the Garifuna in Honduras and the Miskito in Nicaragua (Meringer 2010). Today, many of these groups are colloquially (and legally) referred to as indigenous yet are descendants of those imported as chattel to the New World well after the initial period of European colonization. In the Arctic, some communities were labeled indigenous long after contact was made during European colonization, such as the Sami peoples inhabiting areas in Norway and Sweden. These groups were listed as indigenous due to notions of cultural imperialism conducted by European powers, valuing indigenous culture as something to be preserved (Corson 1995).

UNDERSTANDING INDIGENEITY

Grasping conceptions of indigeneity is impossible without either experiencing indigeneity oneself or distantly (yet procedurally) humanizing indigenous persons.

According to a 2002 United Nations report, there are over 300 million indigenous persons in the world. These groups live in over 70 countries as members of about 5,000 communities (United Nations 2002). At the international level, the treatment of indigenous persons remains non-standardized. Differences between de jure and de facto policies towards indigenous groups exist in nearly every country with a significant proportion of such communities, most commonly over questions of national assimilation, which naturally appeals to the institutional and bureaucratic nature of the nation-state (Varfolomeeva 2012, 69).

The solution, however, does not clearly lie at the supranational level. As mentioned earlier, there are unsolved criticisms leveled at how the United Nations has evolved to code indigeneity. The European Convention on Human Rights occasionally stands at odds with others in the international community over the description of indigenous peoples (Kirchner 2016, 13). This conflict comes to its greatest fruition within the judiciary, where protections are guaranteed to some groups on the margins of Europe but far fewer within the mainland (ibid., 2). In effect, the indigenous peoples' movement has formed into "…a global community of indigenous peoples determined to make human rights make a difference" (Carpenter and Riley 2013, 234). The movement has found its footing through the descriptive storytelling of European victimization of their communities, giving visceral accounts of the brutal effects of international colonialism.

The very existence of such a noticeable movement, traceable to the past 50 years, is itself anecdotal evidence of such brutality. Therefore, the differences between those that were colonized and those that practiced colonialism could serve as the firm line that international and state institutions have been attempting to find. However, there are also other metrics of indigeneity. Depending on the sociopolitical context, purely urban/rural splits can and have served as legal definitions for indigeneity, such as with the Kikuyu community in Central Kenya (Robertson 1997). Recently, the transition toward cultural imperialism has become a common unit of measurement for indigeneity. This transition has come to surpass even the physical violence imparted by colonial powers, the traditional means of defining indigeneity, as the existence of a coercive and forceful imposition of a given culture onto a preexisting one has grown into a key arbiter of indigeneity (Hiller and Carlson 2018, 45). Historically, such a context is tied to the geopolitics of the Cold War, where American media and government agencies became increasingly alarmed about Soviet assimilation projects in Siberian indigenous communities, despite lacking a clear history of violent human conflict in that region (Van Hoyweghen and Smis 2002, 59). This role of the global order concerning the temporal nature of indigenous groups is often overlooked by academics in international relations. In his article "Indigenous Peoples and International Law Issues," indigenous legal scholar S. James Anaya argued that scholars missing such a point leads to fissures in notions of state sovereignty, questions of the legitimacy of self-determination, and a failure to acknowledge "the role of non-state actors in international legal pressures" (1998, 96-98).

INDIGENEITY AND VICTIMIZATION

Therefore, I arrive at the current state of international indigenous jurisprudence. Victimization has become the key metric for codifying indigeneity, even if it has not been formally described as such. Suffering the effects of cultural imperialism imposed by a colonial power has become the de facto test of indigeneity in the world, a practice which human violence is argued to stem from. Such an argument over the socially coercive role of colonialism is partially what the Martinez Cobo definition appears to argue, and generally is how the definition is interpreted in international courts today (Musafiri 2012). This definition has been expanded by international institutions in recent years, namely with the 1989 International Labor Organization Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention as well as the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Understanding this, Cobo's understanding of victimization has neither been expanded on nor fully eliminated, with practically no academic articles outside of specific case studies discussing a generalizable role that both cultural and human colonial oppression played not just towards indigenous groups as a point in history but also in the very creation of indigeneity as a historical concept.

It is worth noting, however, some possible oversights in this analysis. Thus far, this research may have given the appearance that only the same groups that coercively exported their systems of power were also able to export the critiques of it. Western bureaucratic institutions continue to play a massive role in the inclusion of indigenous groups in their own preferred channels of recognition, such as with supranational organizations or non-governmental organizations. However, this does not mean erasing the sovereign and anticolonial voices that have always existed within indigenous communities. It is an unfortunate circumstance of today's paradigm that forcibly reduces indigenous voices to the margins of international political discourse. In this research, I hope to convey the point that dominant discourses are by no means justified due to their position and would like to trace genealogical differences over time between narratives of indigenous human victimization and cultural victimization.

INDIGENEITY IN THE ARCTIC

So, where does the Arctic fit into this conception of indigeneity? Native Arctic communities have had some of the most difficult times in achieving recognition as indigenous, with most of the nearly four million indigenous persons living in the region only recently achieving legal recognition (Dubreuil 2011, 924). According to the national legal codes that most Arctic countries use to govern their indigenous populations, there is no reason for Arctic indigenous groups to be left out. However, just as the human understanding of indigeneity can best be understood with an understanding of victimization, so can common perceptions of non-indigeneity. There was less popular demand for Arctic communities, particularly in Asia and Europe, to become codified as indigenous because Arctic colonization was, for the most part, much less violent (ibid., 937). For much of the colonial period, namely following the Russian conquest of Siberia starting in 1850, Arctic indigenous communities were left to their own accord and were only required to participate in national assimilation projects such as adoption of the Russian language and school system. In addition, fewer resources and lower populations limited the Arctic to what it had an abundance of: territory to be claimed (Berkman 2012, 145). By the turn of the 20th century, the Arctic had become a geopolitical landscape under the close eye of the world powers at the time. When the specter of the Cold War guided military strategists to inspect every element of national security as zero-sum, the Arctic became immeasurably valuable. This paradigm did not only affect the Arctic landmass, however. In an effort to occupy land that could be used as a staging area for a future Soviet invasion, the Canadian government in 1953-55 forcibly relocated Inuit communities from the Eastern Hudson Bay to the High Arctic. In Russia, the 1582 Cossack colonization of Siberia led by Yermak led to a bloody and lasting campaign to potentially use as a point of reference for Siberian indigenous groups. However, the Russian rule over the area was generally lenient in terms of traditional notions of colonial oppression, although later Soviet doctrine was heavily assimilationist in terms of cultural policy.

Therefore, there was far less discourse on Arctic indigeneity until cultural imperialism became a legitimized discourse as a means for indigeneity (Bartels and Bartels 2006). During the Cold War, this notion of cultural imperialism became increasingly cited as a means of critiquing Soviet colonization and assimilation of indigenous groups. In such regions, while generally popular policies of collectivizing indigenous land ownership and stringent antislavery measures were passed, the Soviet Union undertook widespread assimilation policies. As mentioned earlier, such policies primarily featured standardized language and schooling reforms as well as ideological training (ibid., 273). As assimilation became a point of controversy for international audiences concerned with indigenous groups, indigenous Siberian groups were generally given widespread legitimacy in their claims. This was not true for all Siberian communities, however.

Representing the contrapositive position and the necessity that experienced victimization is to indigenous groups, the Pomors, a Siberian group seeking indigenous classification in Russia today, is still waiting for recognition. The Pomors' positivist claim stems from existing cultural practices, which mirror many other indigenous groups in their region of Siberia. However, such practices do not mirror their historical experiences with colonization, as the group is made up of ethnic Russian settlers native to Veliky Novgorod. These settlers themselves were a part of the Russians' colonial procedures during the conquest of Siberia; their claim to indigeneity has never been approved and thereby brings the argument for cultural practices as justification of indigeneity into question (Blockland and Reibler 2011).

CONCLUSION

Indigeneity as discourse is rooted in similar material notions produced by modernity as the ways of measuring it. Because recognizing the contributions and pain that indigenous groups have felt at the behest of their newfound countries is increasingly relevant today, there needs to be a better understanding of how indigeneity as a notion genealogically developed. In doing so, we need to return to our historical position of indigeneity. This means officially removing positivist contemporary qualifiers for indigeneity and finally giving historical legitimacy to the claims of and recognizing the violent atrocities or coercive behavior that colonial powers imparted upon indigenous groups. This position is no more relevant than in the Arctic, where the negotiated challenge to indigeneity continues to this day as groups not previously held under the international spectacle are coming to the forefront with their own stories of colonial experiences. It is imperative to recognize the importance of human and cultural victimization to us as humans in recognizing indigenous groups, and we need to demand that our international institutions do the same. If not, we run the risk of losing the histories and valuable stories of indigenous groups, eliminating a discourse that may provide us with alternatives to the system of modernity that produced the victimization in the first place.

WORKS CITED

Ahren, Mattias. 2016. Indigenous Peoples' Status in the International Legal System. Oxford University Press.

Anaya, S. James. 1998. "Indigenous Peoples and International Law Issues." Proceedings of the Annual Meeting (American Society of International Law) 92: 96–99.

Baglo, Cathrine. 2014. "Rethinking Sami Agency during Living Exhibitions:: From the Age of Empire to the Postwar World." In Performing Indigeneity, edited by

Laura R. Graham and H. Glenn Penny, 136–68. Global Histories and Contemporary Experiences. University of Nebraska Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1d9nmw6.10.

Bartels, Dennis, and Alice L. Bartels. 2006. "Indigenous Peoples of the Russian North and Cold War Ideology." Anthropologica 48 (2): 265–79. https://doi.org/10.2307/25605315.

Bens, Jonas. 2020. "Indigeneity and the Law." In The Indigenous Paradox, 1–22.

Rights, Sovereignty, and Culture in the Americas. University of Pennsylvania Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv16t6dx7.5.

Berkman, Paul. 2012. "Geopolitics of Arctic Sea-Ice Minima." The Brown Journal of World Affairs 19 (1): 145–53.

Blockland, Rogier, and Michael Reibler. 2011. "Komi-Saami-Russian Contacts on the Kola Penninsula." Studies in Slavic and General Linguistics 38: 5–26.

Carpenter, Kristen A., and Angela Riley. 2013. "Indigenous Peoples and the Jurisgenerative Moment in Human Rights." SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 2220573. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network. https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2220573.

Corson, David. 1995. "Norway's 'Sámi Language Act': Emancipatory Implications for the World's Aboriginal Peoples." Language in Society 24 (4): 493–514.

Dubreuil, Antoine. 2011. "The Arctic of the Regions: Between Indigenous Peoples and Subnational Entities—Which Perspectives?" International Journal 66 (4): 923–38.

Graham, Laura R., and H. Glenn Penny. 2014. "Performing Indigeneity:: Emergent Identity, Self-Determination, and Sovereignty." In Performing Indigeneity, edited by Laura R. Graham and H. Glenn Penny, 1–31. Global Histories and Contemporary Experiences. University of Nebraska Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1d9nmw6.5.

Hiller, Chris, and Elizabeth Carlson. 2018. "These Are Indigenous Lands: Foregrounding Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Sovereignty as Primary Contexts for Canadian Environmental Social Work." Canadian Social Work Review / Revue Canadienne de Service Social 35 (1): 45–70.

Kirchner, Stefan. 2016. "Conceptions of Indigenousness in the Case Law of the European Court of Human Rights." SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 3499402. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network. https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3499402.
Makdisi, Saree. 2005. "Said, Palestine, and the Humanism of Liberation." Critical Inquiry 31 (2): 443–61. https://doi.org/10.1086/430974.

Meringer, Eric Rodrigo. 2010. "The Local Politics of Indigenous Self-Representation: Intraethnic Political Division among Nicaragua's Miskito People during the Sandinista Era." The Oral History Review 37 (1): 1–17.

Musafiri, Prosper Nobirabo. 2012. "Right to Self-Determination in International Law: Towards Theorisation of the Concept of Indigenous Peoples/National Minority?" International Journal on Minority and Group Rights 19 (4): 481–532.

O'Connor, Mary I. 2016. "Mixtecs and Modernity." In Mixtec Evangelicals, 27–42. Globalization, Migration, and Religious Change in a Oaxacan Indigenous Group.

University Press of Colorado. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1gpcbxk.9.

Robertson, Claire C. 1997. "Black, White, and Red All over: Beans, Women, and Agricultural Imperialism in Twentieth-Century Kenya." Agricultural History 71 (3): 259–99.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 2015. Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History, 20th Anniversary Edition. 2nd Revised edition. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press.

United Nations for Indigenous Peoples. 1981. "Martínez Cobo Study." July 30, 1981. https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/publications/martinez-cobo-study.html.

——. 2002. “UNPFII First Session.” New York, N.Y. https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/unpfii-sessions-2/unpfii-first-session.html.

Van Hoyweghen, Saskia, and Stefaan Smis. 2002. “The Crisis of the Nation-State in Central Africa: A Theoretical Introduction.” Review of African Political Economy 29 (93/94): 575–81.

Varfolomeeva, Anna. 2012. “Evolution of the Concept of ‘indigenous People’ in the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation : The Case Study of Vepses.” Central European University. /paper/Evolution-of-the-Concept-%22Indigenous-People%22-in-the-Varfolomeeva/5870cb6eb1143cb7780dce350b03ce36c12d019e.