



The trope of ‘the ecological Indian’ in retrospect: Reflections on the concept of indigeneity

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ABSTRACT: This essay discusses the concept of ‘indigeneity’ and the pervasive attribution to Indigenous people of ecological wisdom. Beyond the complex modern politics surrounding Indigenous identities, the concept refers to cultural worldviews that are antithetical to modernity, particularly as they relate to social and human-environmental relations, sustainability, and money. A common denominator of the many observations on the ecological sensibilities of Indigenous people appears to be their embeddedness: their rejection of abstraction and the decontextualising forces of money. Another way of expressing this is their commitment to a specific place. The debate on ‘the ecological Indian’ that engaged many historians and anthropologists over three decades – most intensely from the late 1970s to the late 2000s – reflects a genuine concern about alternative ways of organising social and human-environmental relations. Many environmentalists praise Indigenous peoples as guardians of ‘traditional ecological knowledge,’ which might help us become more sustainable. A more profound aspect of what is being referred to as Indigenous ecological wisdom, however, is the inclination to maintain a close attachment to place. Such attachment is conducive to the kind of relational ontologies that Edward Tylor disparaged as animism. This paradoxical impasse of modernity – the widespread admiration of its cosmological antithesis – poses a formidable challenge to post-Enlightenment civilisation. This essay explores the image of Indigenous ecological wisdom, rooted in the historical encounter between European and Native American societies and today reflecting widespread doubts about the sustainability of capitalist civilisation. It attempts to determine the core of the inadequacy that haunts modern people who are prone to ennoble the generic Native. In identifying the modern sense of alienation and placelessness that underlies such projections, it rejects naïve essentialism as well as ironic versions of constructionism, both of which generate political and existential problems for Indigenous people. It concludes that the extolling of the ecological Native is a projection of widespread discontent with the alienation of modern capitalist civilisation, ultimately deriving from monetisation and the so-called Axial transition toward an abstraction of worldviews and social relations.

Keywords: indigeneity; ecological wisdom; human-environmental relations; embeddedness; place; animism; Native Americans

Preamble

In 1983, three environmental activists from Nova Scotia, Canada, travelled to Sweden to protest the Swedish corporation Stora Kopparberg’s plans to aerially spray herbicides over its clearcuts on Cape Breton Island. The company ran a pulp mill on the island and wanted to secure its future supplies of conifer pulpwood from being overrun by deciduous saplings.

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The herbicide to be used was banned in Sweden and related to the infamous Agent Orange applied by Americans to defoliate trees in Vietnam. One of the environmentalists was Ryan Googoo, band chief at the Mi'kmaq First Nation community of Whycocomagh, who complained that aerial spraying in the vicinity of Mi'kmaq communities would be harmful to their health. The issue was widely publicised in Swedish media and immediately gained strong public support in the country, even from prime minister Olof Palme. It appealed in a very straightforward way to Swedish sensibilities about Indigenous people,¹ environmental destruction, capitalist corporations, and the Vietnam War.

In 1988, as Stora Kopparberg was celebrating its 700th anniversary in the city of Falun, another delegation of environmentalists arrived from Nova Scotia to repeat the protests. This time, too, one of the activists, Charles Bernard, Jr., was a Mi'kmaq from Whycocomagh. Again, the involvement of Indigenous people received much attention in Swedish media. Some newspapers referred to the three environmentalists collectively as 'Indians' (*Dala-Demokraten*, 21 June 1988), although only one of them was Indigenous. Like Googoo five years earlier, Bernard arrived dressed in conventional modern clothing, but was advised by Swedish partners to don seemingly 'Indian' (but conspicuously non-Mi'kmaq) insignia, including a feather headband and a drum. Seizing on the dramaturgical character of the encounter, the president of Stora Kopparberg, Bo Berggren, embraced Bernard dressed in traditional Swedish folk costume. The startling photograph was published in the leading paper *Expressen* (19 June 1988), which declared "The Indian War Over – Winner: Bo Berggren."

It seemed clear that the role of Indigenous people in these protests could be examined from a variety of perspectives, ranging from the incentives and experiences of individual activists, to the symbolic power of Indigenous voices within environmentalist discourse. Between May 1991 and April 1993, I spent a total of ten months in Nova Scotia investigating these issues. Some of my conclusions were published in articles in various contexts (Hornborg 1993, 1994, 1995, 1997, 1998). As I revisit my field notes more than 30 years later, I discover that the passing of three decades has largely shifted the focus of my concerns. While much of my attention in the 1990s focused on the existential and political incentives propelling specific cases of Indigenous activism, I would now place more emphasis on the widespread trope of 'the ecological Indian' as the condition for such activism. What does this pervasive concession to Indigenous critique ultimately signify? This is a separate issue – and requires separate analysis – from the opportunities for self-assertion that it offers Indigenous movements.

For ten months I traced the complex networks of relations between several environmental organisations and different factions of Mi'kmaq activists and politicians across Nova Scotia. It became evident that mainstream Canadian society had prepared a discursive 'niche' for Indigenous environmentalists and that many Mi'kmaq were keen to occupy it, now that they were finally being listened to. Journalists played a key role in helping to frame Mi'kmaq concerns in structurally predictable ways, sometimes literally putting words in the mouths of their interviewees (Hornborg 1994: 249). In addition to protesting herbicides, clearcuts, and other aspects of industrial forestry, Mi'kmaq had become involved in a range

¹ Christopher Vecsey has quoted Åke Hultkrantz as saying: "We Swedes are crazy for Indians; we always have been" (Parkhill 1997: 126). This was embarrassingly illustrated by a group of European hippies claiming to be Mi'kmaq, who in 1992 stayed for several months in the forests of northern Sweden, enjoying the good will of credulous Swedes (Hornborg 1998: 208).

of environmental issues on Cape Breton and the adjacent mainland. Most dramatically, their different factions – from band council bureaucrats to militant traditionalists – had united in opposing a proposed granite quarry on a mountain regarded as sacred. The prominence of Indigenous voices in these environmental conflicts – and the efficacy of their objections, recognised by non-Native environmental organisations that were eager to invite their collaboration – clearly had structural requisites. In this retrospective essay, I shall reflect on the pervasive category of ‘the ecological Indian’ – its emergence, contestations, and transformations over time. Rather than dwell on ethnographical specifics, I shall focus on the modern connotations of indigeneity that were a precondition to Mi’kmaq engagement in environmental issues. My final aim is to understand the extolling of the ecological Native as a projection of widespread discontent with the alienation of modern capitalist civilisation. The pivotal role of Mi’kmaq environmentalists in Swedish media in the 1980s, thus serves as an entry-point into a broader reflection on the widespread ambivalence about modernity. The pervasive trope of ‘the ecological Indian,’ as illustrated by the perspectives and deliberations discussed here, helps to illuminate this ambivalence.

The emergence of the trope

The debate on ‘the ecological Indian’ that engaged many historians and anthropologists over three decades – most intensely from the late 1970s to the late 2000s – reflects a genuine concern about alternative ways of organising human-environmental relations. It can be traced to the divide between Native and settler colonialist societies in the Americas, reflecting fundamental differences in how the two populations conceived of social as well as human-environmental relations. The confrontation between European and Native American societies was unilaterally genocidal, reducing Indigenous populations in most areas by at least 90%, but its cultural ramifications worked both ways. The historical ambivalence of the settler colonists vis-à-vis the natives – a characteristic blend of fear, condescension, guilt, and admiration – has remained an enduring component not only of American culture, but also of the European worldview. In the late 17th and early 18th century, Native American critiques of European society strongly influenced French intellectuals whose ideas were foundational to the Enlightenment (Graeber and Wengrow 2021). Critiques of European civilisation by Rousseau and others frequently referred to Indigenous Americans as a foil for the avarice and injustices of Europe. Such rhetorical polarisation of Amerindian and European cultures – rooted in real differences but transmuted through the centuries – has been particularly prominent in the past few decades of deliberations on human-environmental relations.

Confrontations between capitalist civilisation and Indigenous peoples have occurred on all continents, but the extent to which Native North Americans have come to serve as the paradigmatic antithesis of modern Europeans has granted this specific opposition a symbolic centrality that is emulated in Indigenous struggles worldwide, from Polynesia to Scandinavia (Tsing [2007] 2020). The discussion in this essay is mainly focused on how indigeneity has been represented among historians, anthropologists, and activists in North

America during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.²

In its most general form, the conventional stereotype suggests that Native Americans are 'ecologically wiser' than non-Natives. This is the simplest and most essentialist approach to the issue, seemingly based on historical evidence, and widely popularised in Euro-American societies for centuries. It is essentialist in the sense that it attributes ecological wisdom to an ethnic category of people, without regard to cultural, historical, or individual variations. Although a persistent trope, it is increasingly rare to find it professed in this simple, categorical form, except as part of political rhetoric. Such rhetoric has found support in several overly categorical narratives written in the 1980s and 1990s by environmentalists, historians of religion, anthropologists, and environmental historians (e.g., Hughes 1983; Suzuki and Knudtson 1992; Merchant 1992: 110-131; Anderson 1996; Harrod 2000).

Introducing their collection of "sacred Native stories of nature" from all over the world, environmentalists David Suzuki and Peter Knudtson (1992: 18) assert that "there is a fundamental division between Native and Western ecological perspectives." Within Native worldviews, they continue, "the parts and processes of the universe are, to varying degrees, holy; to science, they can only be secular." This distinct dichotomy between Native and non-Native understandings of the environment is a recurrent theme among environmental historians describing the ecological transformations of North America after European colonisation (Cronon 1983; Hughes 1983; Merchant 1989). It is also frequently reiterated by historians of Native American religions (Vecsey 1980; Hultkrantz 1979; Harrod 2000). Many historians have suggested that modern society, given its professed goal to become more sustainable, has much to learn from the ecological wisdom of Indigenous people. For instance, Donald Hughes ([1983] 1996: 139) asserts that "we can gain much by studying our American Indian heritage and seeking modern applications of the wisdom we find there." Carolyn Merchant (1992: 121) similarly writes that "[a] generation of ecologically conscious people have found inspiration in native American beliefs that nature is alive and the earth is a mother." By the early 1990s, such references to Indigenous ecological wisdom were axiomatic in deliberations on environmental issues.

Indigenous identity, constructionism, and the modern longing for Place

By the 1990s, there had simultaneously emerged a general wariness about attributing essentialised features such as 'wisdom' to an ethnic category like Native Americans. In part, this reflected a growing awareness of the extent to which ethnic identities and attributes are to be understood not as objective essences, but as continuously negotiated means of boundary maintenance vis-à-vis other ethnic categories (Barth [1969] 1998; Sokolovskii and Tishkov 1996). Doubts about the authenticity of purportedly Indigenous identities and sentiments were boosted by the academic turn toward social constructionism. A startling illustration of the insensitivity sometimes produced in ethnographers' first encounters with Indigenous 'invention of tradition' is Eugene E. Roosens' (1989: 47) account of cultural creativity among the Huron (Wendat) of Quebec:

² This limitation stems from the author's fieldwork among Mi'kmaq environmental activists in the 1990s. It should not be interpreted as ignorance or diminishment of Indigenous movements in other parts of the world. In Latin America, particularly in the Andean countries, indigeneity is a considerably more salient political issue than in North America, inspiring strong Indigenous movements in their struggle for a *decolonial* future beyond extractive capitalism.

[M]ost of the modern traits, virtually everything, were ‘counterfeit’: the folklore articles, the hair style, the mocassins, the ‘Indian’ parade costumes, the canoes, the pottery, the language, the music.

At a more popular level, such scepticism may have harked back to how non-Native people and ideas had long infiltrated iconic ‘Amerindian’ figures and messages such as the fraudulent Grey Owl in the 1930s and the adulterated speech of Chief Seattle, which was widely cited and apotheosised by environmentalists in the 1970s.³ Native and non-Native people alike had become increasingly aware of how the identities and imagined features of ‘the American Indian’ were being *produced* in the interaction between Native Americans and mainstream society (Roosens 1989; Francis 1992; Hornborg 1994; Bordewich 1996; Biolsi and Zimmerman 1997; Parkhill 1997; Krech 1999; Harkin and Lewis 2007; Hornborg 2008). Observations on the ‘White Man’s Indian’ refer not only to stereotyped images of Natives that are prevalent among non-Natives, but also to the influence of such projections on the actual formation of ethnic identity and personhood among Native people (cf. Parkhill 1997: 139-144). The dilemma of the ‘positive stereotype’ has generated much frustration among Native Americans, particularly as they have been idealised by the environmental movement.⁴ The Lakota scholar Vine Deloria, Jr., whose compelling critiques of non-Native engagement with Native American societies have been pivotal ever since the publication of his first book *Custer Died for Your Sins* in 1969, saw nothing hopeful in the trope of ‘the ecological Indian’:

American Indian delegations have been active in world environmental movements but have brought only a romantic sentimentalism as their contribution. It is totally disheartening to see Indians interviewed in the seemingly endless documentaries about the environment and find them telling us that the earth is our mother. The interviewer nods wisely, the Indian looks solemn, and the destruction continues. (Deloria 1997: 213)

The turn toward ‘deconstruction’ of conventional, positive stereotypes of Native Americans has led to a widespread scepticism about such stereotypes. Thomas Parkhill (1997) traces how the journalist and folklorist Charles Godfrey Leland (1824-1903) had allowed his own stereotyped images and personal conditions to colour his documentation of Algonquian (Abenaki and Mi’kmaq) legends, published in 1884. Parkhill’s study intertwines several disparate strands of thought relating to his struggles to grasp the cultural dynamics of representing ‘the Indian.’ He begins by referring to a heated 1993 email conversation involving, among others, Ronald Grimes, Sam Gill, Vine Deloria, Jr., and himself, on

³ After his death in 1938, the internationally celebrated ‘Apache’ Grey Owl was revealed to be a pure Englishman by the name of Archie Belaney. The speech attributed to Suquamish/Duwamish chief Seattle (Si’ahl) in 1854 has been radically distorted through multiple non-Native translations and embellishments, finally granting it cult status among environmentalists throughout the world in the 1970s. Scepticism has even been voiced about the Lakota sage Black Elk, who had been a Roman Catholic for over forty years and spent three years in Europe, see Parkhill (1997: 118).

⁴ For a nuanced discussion of the complex relations between radical environmentalists and Native Americans in the 1990s, see Taylor (1997).

the problems of representation raised by European Americans teaching courses on Native American religions. He then recalls the prominent role of fictive 'Indian' dramaturgy at a Boy Scout camp in Vermont that he attended as a teenager, before mentioning some of the many Euro-American movements and individuals who have dedicated themselves to imitating 'Indian' culture. In Parkhill's words, these are examples of non-Natives trying to "incarnate their own images of the 'Indian' stereotype" (Parkhill 1997: 15).

Parkhill shows that Leland's goal was to instil among the settler colonialists a "sense of belonging to the land" (ibid.: 91), a *sense of place*. In this work, he was inspired by German Romantics like Friedrich Schelling, who emphasised the long-term existential connections between humans and the land they experience as their place. Although most Native American activists would no doubt identify with this fundamentally anti-modernist stance, the infamous efforts by German Nazis to convert it into modern politics has made any mention of the attachment of a people (*Volk*) to place politically suspect.⁵ However, having identified the "need for place" as characteristic of contemporary "hegemonic culture," Parkhill (1997: 110) suggests that the United Nations' declaration of 1993 as the International Year of Indigenous People reflects the fact that the need for place had become "a global rather than national or continental matter."⁶

The politics of the ecologically noble Native

Given the widespread idealisation of the ecological Native, Parkhill observes, relations between Natives and non-Natives "will be fraught with unmet and unmeetable expectations at best, and charges of deceit and fraud at worst" (Parkhill 1997: 129). The intimation of fraud is implicit in much of the debate about 'the ecological Indian.' Rather than consider this stereotype a problem inherent in modernity, evoking the placelessness and unsustainability of mainstream society, the anthropologist Shepard Krech III (1999) set out to examine its empirical validity. Instead of approaching the stereotype as a misguided reflection of its authors, he chose to highlight how its targets have failed to live up to its ideals. Krech thus gives the impression of disparaging the generic Native American for falling short of the non-Native fantasy. Adducing a range of circumstances from Pleistocene extinctions, buffalo jumps, and Hohokam salinisation to the 16th- to 19th-century trade in deerskins and beaver pelts, he is intent to rid the environmentalists of their illusions. Parts of his book, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (1999), clearly have an ironic and polemical tone:

[T]hroughout the five-hundred-year history of imagery of Indigenous nobility is a rich tradition whereby the Noble Indian – including today's Ecological Indian – is a foil for critiques of European or American society. As Vine Deloria, Jr., the Lakota activist, remarked, white people "*destroyed planet earth*." Writing as heatedly, many since 1970 have excoriated American society for all the environmental damage in Indian Country, and pointedly charged white people of environmental racism and "radioactive colonialism." (Krech 1999: 214; emphasis in original)

⁵ Parkhill (1997: 192, n28) finds in Deloria (1997), "[o]ne unexpected voice that resonates with German Romanticism."

⁶ Marisol de la Cadena and Orin Starn ([2007] 2020: 10) derive this declaration from the increasing visibility of Indigenous activism and the "new ascendancy [of multiculturalism] in global political discourse."

Krech's approach commits the error of mixing constructionist and essentialist perspectives: although recognising that the stereotype of 'the ecological Indian' is a "projection of Europeans and European-Americans" that has become a "self-image" embedded in the "self-fashioning" of modern Native Americans (Krech 1999: 27), his aim is to expose the poor fit between this image and the actual environmental record of an essentialised population of humans extending throughout the continent from the Pleistocene until today. This approach has understandably provoked much indignation.

Prompted by Krech's book, a conference at the University of Wyoming in 2002 critically discussed its thesis and problematic political implications. Michael Harkin and David Lewis (2007: xxiv) write that "he and his book have been called racist and politically incorrect, easily co-opted by those seeking to dismantle Native American lands, rights, and sovereignty." They note that Vine Deloria, Jr. had issued a call via internet discussion groups to "attend the conference in protest" (Deloria 1997: xxii). In a comment on the animated debate provoked by the book, Krech (2007a: 6, 25, n5) mentions that Deloria had called him "the worst kind of racist." He recognises that his book "was caught up in identity politics and charges of political incorrectness" (Krech 2007b: 348). The politically sensitive character of the topic is underscored by the fact that interpretations of what is said may be contingent on who says it. For example, Murray Wax (1997: 59, n3) had previously cited Deloria himself as saying:

Our activists chastise the white man for his destruction of nature, and admonish people to respect the Sacred Mother Earth, while they themselves are throwing empty beer cans along the road. Many of our communities look like junkyards... While we are poor there is no excuse for being either destructive or dirty about the way we live.

As Krech's book *The Ecological Indian* and the ensuing debate underscored, assessments of Indigenous ecological wisdom or nobility had created a hall of mirrors, filled with contestation, credulousness, cynicism, and insults. The image of the ecological Indian has given Indigenous people considerable political influence, helping them mobilise wide support for local struggles, for instance over land rights.⁷ While there are many instances around the world in which environmentalists and Indigenous people have created successful alliances, in other cases – such as the hunting of iconic wildlife like wolves, seals, or whales – they have been opposed. In such disputes, environmentalists have often expressed disappointment and anger, accusing Indigenous people of betraying their authentic cultural values. Paul Nadasdy (2005) has shown that such controversies largely derive from the recurrent mistake among non-Native environmentalists of judging Native American positions on resource management in terms of a spectrum of Euro-American cultural categories, that to many Native Americans are meaningless. Michael Dove (2006) has reviewed the various problems that recur at the interface of Indigenous movements and environmental politics, including charges of opportunism, inauthenticity, exclusivity, and racism.

In a highly opinionated intervention, Adam Kuper (2003: 392, 395) has acerbically rejected the very concept of indigeneity, proposing that Native Americans are as immigrant

⁷ For an early observation in this regard, see Conklin and Graham 1995.

as Euro-Americans, that land claims based on descent imply a “drift to racism,” and that spokespeople for Indigenous identities paradoxically demand recognition “in the idiom of Western culture theory.” Kuper (2003: 395, 401) argues that the image of the ‘primitive’ is constructed “to suit the Greens and the anti-globalisation movement” and finishes his response to critical comments with a sarcastic crescendo that positions him as a frontline chauvinist of capitalist civilisation:

Like the old enemies of civilization, those who inveigh against globalization seem to expect the Noble Savage to stand in its way, like Obelix the Gaul hurling menhirs at the Romans.

Toward the end of the 2000s, the discourse on ‘the ecological Indian’ appears to have reached an impasse, in which the various arguments and incentives had become plain to see for most participants. This is not to say that the rhetorical use of the image would not continue to pervade popular and academic deliberations on environmental issues to this day,⁸ but that its proponents and critics alike had become familiar with the political strategies and contexts in which it tends to be promoted and contested. It had become increasingly clear that the romantic stereotype of Indigenous ecological wisdom is largely a Euro-American projection, but also that it continues to provide Native Americans and other Indigenous people with a politically compelling platform, which at times leads them to confrontations with non-Native groups, including environmentalists. The diverse ways in which the category ‘Indigenous people’ is being employed in different contexts, reflecting the political strategies of variously positioned social groups, does not consistently harmonise with environmentalist concerns (de la Cadena and Starn [2007] 2020). Given that the concept of indigeneity is a product of colonial history and of modernity, the political tensions that it generates must be understood as internal to the self-critical modern civilisation from which it sprang. Beyond ethnographically tracing the diverse ways in which it is deployed, anthropology can illuminate the contradictory genesis of the concept itself.

Two readers in environmental anthropology from the late 2000s offer overviews of then-current debates on the relation between environmental issues and Indigenous cultures, knowledge systems, and movements (Haenn and Wilk 2006; Dove and Carpenter 2008). While the positions range widely – from David Maybury-Lewis’ (2006) essentialist nostalgia for the “tribal wisdom” of the Xavante; through Peter Brosius’ (2006) deconstruction of how environmentalists’ distortions of ecological knowledge among the Penan are adopted by the Penan themselves; to Will Anderson’s (2006) comment on the controversial resumption of whaling among the Makah – the fundamental tropes, relations, and political tensions reiterate a familiar pattern. Whether genuine or spurious, the invocation of the ecological Native continues to organise the modern worldview. Although put to different uses, the image of modernity’s Other haunts us as a fantasy, a conscience, a desire for authentic wisdom. Beyond the myriad tangible ways in which it shapes the lives of people across the globe, it tells us something about our ambivalence regarding modern civilisation. Even if,

⁸ As recently as in his final, posthumously published book, Bruno Latour (2024: 30-31) writes: “Whereas, just a few decades ago, Indigenous peoples were considered to belong to the past of peoples who were unanimously marching toward progress, now those same Indigenous peoples are *ahead of us* in the search for a way of caring for the world that we now share with them” (emphasis in original).

over the course of three decades around the turn of the millennium – from the late 1970s to the late 2000s – we learnt to be sceptical of essentialising attributions of ecological wisdom to specific ethnic groups, we are no less convinced that there must be an alternative to our own social and ecological deficiencies. Although less likely to be projected onto real people, the image of the ‘noble savage’ remains an integral part of civilisation itself. It is incumbent on anthropology to comprehend what this persistent trope ultimately signifies.

Wisdom sits in places

Although they hardly mention the ecological predicament of humankind,⁹ Graeber and Wengrow’s (2021) world history *The Dawn of Everything* treats the image of the ‘noble savage’ as a powerful reminder that human life could be more agreeable than it is for most people. In the spirit of their conviction that hierarchy and inequality are not inevitable features of human societies but unfortunate conditions that can be rejected, we must identify the source of our discontents, persistently pursuing their most fundamental question about the shortcomings of modern civilisation: “How did we get stuck?”

Beyond the struggle between essentialism and constructionism, anthropologists and philosophers trying to capture what the tenacious image of Indigenous ecological wisdom might refer to have focused on either of two aspects, which seem divergent but are closely related. On the practical side, many have emphasised the fact that Indigenous people tend to possess very detailed knowledge of their local ecosystems. This ‘traditional ecological knowledge,’ as it is commonly called, is often invoked in arguments for local self-governance. It is also understood as a potential asset for externally trained experts in sustainable resource management. On the experiential side, there have been numerous observations on the phenomenological dimension of Indigenous people’s relations to the landscapes and places to which they may feel intimately – even inextricably – connected. These two aspects generally engage two quite different kinds of scholars (resource managers versus philosophers), although both aspects tend to derive from the same circumstances: people’s long-term attachment to place. This illustrates how our understanding of what is clearly a single phenomenon is fragmented by the way knowledge production is organised in Euro-American society. Representations of the objective biophysical environment are conceived as fundamentally separate from subjective experiences of the same place, although both may have been formed through long and intimate involvement with that place. Even if studies of Indigenous knowledge often evoke the sociocultural dimensions of local experience, they tend to gravitate toward a managerialist approach (Berkes 1999; Menzies 2006; Jessen et al. 2022; Gómez-Baggethun 2022). While regularly merged in environmental rhetoric, ethnobiology and phenomenology belong to very different research traditions requiring radically divergent points of departure (Nazarea 1999; Sillitoe 2007). The notion that outsiders trained in resource management may incorporate local knowledge to enhance sustainability is to underestimate the essential differences between two systems of knowledge: specific versus abstract, experiential versus cerebral, local versus global, contextual versus decontextualised. As Paul Sillitoe (2007: 12) concedes, “there are dimensions to understanding and living in the world other than the intellectual, for human experience and knowledge encompass far more than words can convey.” Local knowledge

⁹ I discuss this puzzling omission in a previous publication (Hornborg 2023: 208).

is a *relation* between knower and known, not a resource accessible for extraction from its context. Although the ambition of resource managers, development agencies, and educators to incorporate the local in the global is no doubt well-meaning, the structural obstacles are formidable. It recalls the asymmetric relation between what Jürgen Habermas called “system” and “lifeworld” – and the aspiration of modernist schemes of social engineering to encompass and control their subjects, which, as James Scott (1998) showed in *Seeing Like a State*, must always fail. The celebration by modern resource managers of ‘traditional ecological knowledge,’ ‘Indigenous knowledge,’ or ‘local knowledge’ is finally as paradoxical and contradictory as the image of the ecological Native from which it derives. There is something profoundly incongruous about a civilisation eulogising the peoples, cultures, and knowledge systems that it is in the process of destroying.

If a fundamental condition of Indigenous people’s claims to ecological wisdom is their long-term attachment to place, then their message is clearly antithetical to a civilisation founded on decontextualisation and placelessness. Yet, as colonial and capitalist expansionism has been transmuted into the subtle logic of the global market, public discourse has admitted official concessions to Indigenous peoples that were unthinkable a few generations ago. This has confirmed and augmented internal doubts about the sustainability of capitalist civilisation while providing opportunities for marginalised groups to assert their ethnic identities and land claims in new ways. This reorganisation of the discursive landscape has put many anthropologists in an ambivalent position. Having internalised the tenets of constructionism, it has been difficult for them to accept the new ethnic claims at face value. The dilemma is summed up by Michael Dove and co-authors:

What do we make of the extraordinary coincidence that anthropology (and the other social sciences) began to critique the concept of Indigeneity at the very time that it was being legitimised by mainstream global organisations like the United Nations and the International Labor Organization? How is academia’s assault on locality related to the larger assault on locality of modernity? (Dove et al. 2007: 148)

To the first question, the answer would be that global legitimisation has encouraged instrumental assertions of indigeneity that anthropologists are uniquely positioned to examine. The second question is more troubling. Having recently believed themselves to have jettisoned their ties to colonialism, anthropologists must now consider if their sceptical stance makes them into accomplices of neoliberal modernity.

As we have noted, long-term familiarity and identification with a particular geographical space is conducive to two different aspects of what environmentalists have referred to as ecological wisdom: on the one hand, detailed knowledge of local ecosystems and, on the other, an existential and emotional connection to unique places. The former is often “extremely sophisticated and of considerable practical value” (Suzuki and Knudtson 1992: 15). It is this “practical value” that has inspired externally trained experts, including commercial interests, to approach ‘traditional ecological knowledge’ as a resource to be tapped. The comprehensiveness of Indigenous ecological knowledge is typically conveyed by means of quantification: the Hanunoo can distinguish 1,600 plant species; the Kayapó “rely upon more than 250 different species of plants for their fruits alone, and hundreds

more for their roots, nuts, and other edible parts”; traditional healers in Southeast Asia may use up to 6,500 kinds of medicinal herbs; and so on (ibid.). The modern documentation of such “repositories of vast accumulations of traditional knowledge and experience” (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987: 114) is a distinctly different enterprise than anthropological attempts to fathom the experiential dimension of a profound engagement of humans with their local environment. The latter dimension is inherently difficult to study and communicate because it consists of perceptions and sensations that occur beyond the reach of everyday language.

Often drawing on the tradition of phenomenology as developed by philosophers like Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, some anthropologists have felt the urge to convey the tacit connection to place that they have sensed among the generally rural people who have hosted their fieldwork. Although largely unspoken, such connections have made a strong impression on many anthropologists accustomed to more placeless lives. In the mid-90s, some of them addressed the phenomenology of ‘place’ as a focus of observation and analysis. Pioneering contributions to this discourse include a collection edited by Eric Hirsch and Michael O’Hanlon (1995). In his introduction, Hirsch (1995: 9) notes that, in geography and anthropology, there is “a tension evident in the relationship between the subject-position of place and the non-subject-position of space in the way landscape has been taken up as an analytical concept.” Efforts by anthropologists to convey the attachment to place that they have noticed among their hosts have acknowledged the constraints of regular language – and the contradictory aspirations of anthropology – by consciously resorting to metaphor and poetry (Jackson 1995; Basso 1996). Significantly, their most thought-provoking ethnographies rely on a radical commitment to empiricism. Employing the concept of ‘home’ rather than place, Michael Jackson (1995: 123; emphases in original) explains how fieldwork among the Walpiri in Australia led him to “eschew thinking of home as an entity or essence that could be *defined*, and to focus instead on *describing* the lived relationship suggested by the phrase ‘being-at-home-in-the-world.’” In exploring the multi-layered relations to place among the Western Apache, Keith Basso (1996: 145, 148) similarly emphasises that, whereas “sense of place is a universal genre of experience,” it everywhere “hinges on the particulars.” Jackson’s and Basso’s ethnographies are profound reminders that such attachment to place is not easily accessible to abstract theorisation. While pervasively evoked in images of the ecological Native, it remains tantalisingly out of reach for most modern people, for whom it would be inconceivable that “selfhood and placehood are completely intertwined” (ibid., 146). Yet, the constitution of the thoroughly local person often does seem inextricable from context or place, which Richard Shweder and Edmund Bourne (1984: 166) refer to as a distinctive mode of social thought among some non-Western peoples that “goes under a variety of cognate descriptions – concrete, non-abstractive, non-generalizing, occasion-bound, context-specific, undifferentiated, situational.” To be profoundly *emplaced* means identifying oneself with points of reference that are concrete and specific rather than abstract and interchangeable.

To invoke the extra-linguistic sensibilities that are implicit in any human bonding with a particular environment, some anthropologists have focused on the concept of ‘emotion’ (Anderson 1996; Milton 2002). Like other phenomena at the individual level, emotions are expressions of the relations in which they are immersed. In an article based on her fieldwork among Nayaka hunter-gatherers in India, Nurit Bird-David (1999) proposed a

rethinking of the foundational anthropological concept of 'animism' in terms of what she calls a "relational epistemology." She argues that what Edward Tylor in 1871 had defined as a 'primitive' and erroneous understanding of the world, attributing animacy and spirit to inanimate things in the environment, is really a matter of *relating* to it, rather than clinically separating knower and known through a modern, objectivist stance committed to detached representation. "Relational" ways of knowing stand for "attentiveness to variances and invariances in behaviour and response of things in states of relatedness and for getting to know such things as they change through the vicissitudes over time of the engagement with them" (Bird-David 1999: 77). For animists, to know is to relate. It is to extend to all aspects of the environment the expectation that propitiation will be reciprocated with benevolence: in other words, the cognitive skills essential to sociability. In this light, the modern objectivism epitomised by Descartes is quite simply correlated with alienation.

Conclusions: Relatedness, axiality, and money

The image of the ecologically attuned Native evokes a cluster of features that seem diametrically opposed to the premises of modern civilisation: contextual versus general, concrete versus abstract, local versus global, experiential versus intellectual, relational versus objectivist, and so on. On closer examination, these oppositions can be understood as closely related to each other and as jointly traceable to the development of Eurasian civilisation after the onset of the so-called Axial Age around 600 BCE (Jaspers [1949] 2021). As Richard Seaford (2004) has observed, this was the point in history at which the first coined money appeared.

The literature on the Axial Age is voluminous, having engaged scholars in philosophy, sociology, psychology, history, anthropology, and several other fields (Bellah and Joas 2012). Marshall Sahlins (2022: 4) refers to "the large cottage industry of scholarly commentary" that followed Karl Jaspers' observations on the simultaneous transitions to "transcendentalism" in several parts of Eurasia in the Axial Age. Cultures unaffected by the Axial shift to transcendence are characterised by what Sahlins calls "immanentism": the world – including those parts of it that modern people would consider inanimate – is understood as fundamentally sentient and responsive. In Axial cultures, on the other hand, the turn to transcendent spirits left humans with "an earth that had become a subjectless 'nature'" (Sahlins 2022: 4). Sahlins rejects anthropology's traditional approach to the immanentist cultures encountered by Europeans, condescendingly treating their understandings of the world as erroneous 'beliefs' about a reality to which our own has privileged access (Sahlins 2022: 13). A paradigmatic example is Charles de Brosses' discussion in 1760 of African fetishism (Morris and Leonard 2017). De Brosses' excessive condescension regarding convictions about immanent agency is the very opposite of Sahlins' commitment to taking seriously the natives' point of view. Inspired by Giambattista Vico, Sahlins (2022: 21) advocates an anthropology that respects "its informants' words as a distinctive ontology constituting worlds other than ours." Like Bird-David, he understands a pre- or non-Cartesian ontology as a pervasively attentive stance rather than a failed epistemology (*ibid.*: 10).

As Philippe Descola (2013), Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998), Kaj Århem (1996, 1998), and other ethnographers of animist societies have confirmed, what is characteristic of these societies is "the attribution by humans to nonhumans of an interiority identical to their own" (Descola 2013: 129). Their worlds are populated by nonhuman persons to be approached as subjects, rather than objects. Reviewing a vast range of ethnographic

information on immanentist societies around the world, Sahlins demonstrates the ubiquity of such intersubjective relationism. This was the ‘primitive’ condition rejected by the Enlightenment and disparaged by de Brosses, but paradoxically also what some modern environmentalists glorify as ‘sacred ecological wisdom.’ Many modern people thus seem to be torn between what a modern approach *says* about the world and what it *does* to it. Knowledge based on dispassionate detachment may be useful, but tends to be devoid of responsibility.

Bird-David’s point is that animism, understood as a relational approach to the nonhuman environment, is an extension of sociability beyond society. The same point has been made by Descola (1994), who found that Achuar relations to garden plants and wild game had much in common with their relations to children and affines, respectively.¹⁰ To be profoundly embedded in local social and ecological contexts thus appears to be conducive to the kind of relational or immanentist outlooks that Tylor called animism. As Århem (1998: 98-99) suggests, a “participatory ontological stance” derives from “deep practical and experiential involvement in the local environment,” a “radical intimacy between humans and their environment, characteristic of an intensely localised mode of life.” This agrees with the observation that the turn to transcendentalism and abstraction that defined the Axial Age was correlated with *disembedding*, that is, decontextualisation. As David McNally (2020: 39) notes, “one of the oldest Latin meanings of the verb *abstract* is ‘to separate or pull away.’” Abstraction, in turn, is closely associated with money. With the capitalist market economy, McNally writes, comes

the colonization of life by the abstract, quantitative metrics of commodities and prices. ... What guarantees connection to the land is not communal memory, but the (alienated) social synthesis of money. At the most fundamental of levels, monetization is thus a victory of the abstract over the concrete. (McNally 2020: 110-111)

If the Axial transition is correlated with changing social conditions, monetisation indeed appears to be central to the process. The symbolic polarisation of capitalist civilisation and its Indigenous antithesis is not to be understood as an opposition between different kinds of people equipped with different measures of wisdom or nobility. It is an opposition between two divergent human mentalities, reflecting the extent to which social relations have submitted to monetisation. Graeber and Wengrow (2021: 54) cite the French baron de la Hontan’s rendering of the Native American (Wendat) thinker Kandiaronk’s disparaging remarks in the 1690s on money as “the devil of devils.” The important thing is not whose exact words they were – the French baron’s or the Native’s – but the fact that Native American societies provided the French Enlightenment with ideological levers with which to critique the injustices of European society. The critique of the logic of money continues to this day, now more justified than ever.

As many have observed, money tends to truncate the social relations in which an

¹⁰ These cases suggest that human-environmental relations are modelled on social relations. However, given that plants and animals are perceived as nonhuman persons, it is arguably misleading to impute a projection of society onto nature to such relational ontologies, where no society/nature divide is recognised (Descola 2013: 107, 123-124, 250).

exchange is conducted. Whereas a gift is an expression and confirmation of a continuing social relation between the giver and the recipient, most money transactions are understood to be concluded the moment payment is made, beyond which no relation exists between the parties in the deal. Money thus serves as a negation – a dissolution – of social relations. By extension, it dissolves our relation to the natural environment. The radical environmentalist worldview, which for decades has extolled the ecological wisdom of Indigenous people, tends to be fundamentally sceptical of money, markets, and capitalism. Its praise of the ecological Native implicitly appears to assume that Indigenous people are free from the insidious injunctions of money. Concluding a book that endorses the public influence of emotional attachments to nature, anthropologist Kay Milton (2002: 150) writes:

The market systematically destroys whatever it cannot encompass. This includes, not only nature and natural things, but also health, family, friendship, spirituality, knowledge and truth.

While not as likely to be articulated by anthropologists today, given the predominance of a neoliberal worldview, Milton's conviction, a mere two decades ago, persuasively identifies the source of the modern condition of alienation that, I have argued, has generated the trope of 'the ecological Indian.'

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