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Resurrecting Indigenous Ontologies: Biocultural Responses to World-System Crises

Our current world system is still
colonial in many ways. It is these
colonial power relations that

underpin capitalism's and modernity's broader relations of exploitation to Mother Earth and to indigenous peoples. Such colonial power relations have facilitated the imposition of a Eurocentric logic of accumulation and competition that is based on the commodification of nature in the service of endless resource extraction; these processes have sought to dispossess and displace alternative worlds based on land-based lifeways, such as those of indigenous and local communities, instead imposing a monocultural linear history of "progress" as limitless growth abstracted from and exhaustive of Mother Earth's regenerative cycles (World People's Conference on Climate Change & the Rights of Mother Earth, 2010). This very world system "threatens not only the well-being of most of the world's people but also the very survival of our planet" (Patterson & Smith 2018). The current world system is facing an Anthropocene crisis, seen in the multiple manifestations of global climate change and how it fuels all other global crises faced today. A fundamental shift in thinking about our economy, our lifestyle, and what it truly means to have a good life is the alternate pathway needed to achieve environmental, social, and climate justice. These alternative systems already exist in the form of

cultural practices, languages and traditional knowledges rooted in the “traditional ontologies and epistemologies of the world’s Indigenous Peoples” (Stewart-Harawira, 2012). While not contributing to biodiversity loss or climate change, often indigenous peoples are among the communities most immediately affected by environmental degradation and climate disruption. On the other hand, indigenous people and local communities have contributed to and are helping to enhance the resilience of ecosystems they inhabit while creatively responding to the global ecological crisis. At this critical juncture, indigenous ontologies and epistemologies are resurging once again to ground revolutionary alternatives that put planet and people over profit. Throughout the world we can see in action indigenous ontologies fighting against a colonial world-system through biocultural diversity models for conservation. Biocultural diversity comprises biological, cultural and linguistic diversity, interrelated within a complex socio-ecological adaptive system (Maffi & Woodley, 2010). An example of biocultural diversity for conservation projects comes from the Xingu Indigenous Park in Brazil. Over an 11-year period to abate the frequency of illegal invasions into the park and establish

a culturally appropriate management scheme for the park's 4,000 indigenous people. Mapping of the traditional territories, sacred sites, fishing and hunting locales, and other salient features of the landscape has helped drive the conservation of biodiversity in the park. The indigenous peoples of Acre also sustainably use and conserve resources on the lands that were once taken away from them in government-supported land privatization programs (Maffi & Woodley, 2010)



Offering to Pachamama Ceremony in the Laguna Quinsaqaocha, Parque de la Papa

In 2002, El Parque de la Papa in Cusco, Perú was formed by five Quechua communities to constitute

an Indigenous Biocultural Heritage Territory (IBCH). This approach is guided by the community and focuses on the conservation and sustainable use of plant genetic resources through traditional Andean approaches to agrobiodiversity and landscape conservation (Asociación ANDES). As an IBCH, Parque de la Papa is a complex system of interdependent parts centered on the reciprocal relationship between indigenous people and their natural environment. Its various components include biological resources, ranging from the micro (genetic) to the macro (landscape) scales, and extensive knowledge—i.e. ‘traditional knowledge’—about how to adapt to complex ecosystems and sustainably use biodiversity. Some goods—such as foods, water, and seeds—belong to all people and/or are essential for human beings and their world (Asociación ANDES). IBCH refers to the contribution of indigenous peoples to this ‘global commons.’ It also refers to established patterns of behavior in traditional societies that are accepted as law by residents, also called ‘customary law.’” Customary law reflects the Andean principles of reciprocity, duality and equilibrium (Asociación ANDES). Biocultural diversity for conservation is based on the emerging realization that protecting and restoring biodiversity and

maintaining and revitalizing cultural diversity and cultural vitality are intimately interrelated. This implies that to maintain biodiversity it is also necessary to sustain cultural diversity; conversely, to maintain cultural diversity, it is essential to preserve biodiversity (Berkes et.al. 2009; Maffi & Woodley 2010; Gavin et.al. 2015). Reconceptualizing conservation through a biocultural perspective is based on the understanding of connecting local experiences and indigenous groups with each other can reaffirm that, by defending their connection to their land, their language, and by continuing their engagement with their environment, indigenous people are contributing, not only to their 'life projects', but to global diversity as well. The emphasis on earth-based and place-based relationships sometimes gives rise to an under-describing of other core indigenous ontological and cosmological principles (Stewart-Harawira, 2012). In the above case studies, we see an emphasis on the need to secure indigenous tenure within the territory as a starting point for ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation which can help address the global climate change and displacement crises. When indigenous peoples have the legal continuity and certainty of owning their own land it enables

them to carry on using that land in traditional ways, sustainably and respecting it.



Siembra de Papa - Comunidad de Pampacorral, Distrito de Lares

Rural communities and Indigenous Peoples are estimated to hold as much as 65% of the world's land area under customary systems, yet many governments formally recognize their rights to only a fraction of those lands. (Rights & Resource Initiative, 2015). If indigenous communities legally owned their traditional territories in places like Colombia, Bolivia, and Brazil, can prevent emissions between 5 and 42 times more cheaply than carbon capture technologies at gas and coal-fired power plants (World Resource

Institute, 2016). Securing indigenous lands just in those three countries would avert between 42.8 to 59.7 megatons of carbon emissions over a 20-year period which is equivalent of taking between 9 million to 13 million cars off the road. Protecting forests on titled indigenous lands or in indigenous reserves is also typically two to three times cheaper than on land that is not formally owned by native communities – including naturally protected areas. According to a growing body of research, by far the most cost-efficient way of preserving the world's tropical rainforests is to formally recognize the legal rights of indigenous peoples over the lands that they have inherited from generations of ancestors. “For indigenous people, their lands are a crucial part of their well-being. When you take the land away from them, you're taking away their very identity. It is the ones who have been pushed off their land who tend to be most overrepresented when it comes to problems with their physical and mental well-being.” (Tauli-Corpuz, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples). There is no one strategy to address global climate change and its manifestations. With the rate of anthropogenic climate change, time is limited and working towards a cultural and generational shift may

prove to be challenging but not impossible. When political and economic decision-makers fail to change, frontline communities will lead the transformative revolutionary change with or without policy because “change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability but comes through continuous struggle.” It needs to be a multilayered point of attack that rises from the grassroots where an emphasis on grassroots organizing for land defense and indigenous rights and recognition is at the forefront.



Potato Harvest in Pampacorral, Lares

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