



## Book Reviews

### **Political Theory and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**

D. Ivison, P. Patton & W. Sanders (eds.)

*Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, 323pp.*

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This book sets out to explore through its contributors the following questions: How can we render justice to indigenous people, and ‘morally rehabilitate[ ]’ (p. 3) those state projects that began in colonial occupation. The solution, the contributors argue, involves a re-creative act, one that not only overhauls the institutions and power structures of the dominant state and society, but also requires us to revise the way in which we think about political life.

The volume brings together authors of different backgrounds, theoretical interests, and regional knowledge, and the contributors include both established figures and newer voices in the field. The editors juxtapose the experience and insights garnered from different regions — primarily Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States — and put these contributions within an overall frame that reflects the main markers of political legitimacy in the contemporary era — those of sovereignty, identity, and democracy.

For many of the contributors, one of the major obstacles in addressing indigenous claims is a lack of imagination on the part of political practitioners who have become attached to limited conceptions of sovereignty, unity, nationality, jurisdiction, etc. Once we learn to be more flexible in our expectations, they argue, it will be possible for indigenous and non-indigenous peoples to live alongside one another in a legitimate and mutually rewarding way — or at least to live alongside one another *in pursuit* of these objectives.

One of the narrow concepts we need to dispense with, for example, is the idea that there is a once-and-for-all solution to the question of indigenous status and rights. Instead, authors such as J.G.A. Pocock and Jeremy Webber recommend that we adjust to the idea that the terms of coexistence should be born of mutual negotiation and that they should be subject to ongoing re-negotiation. At one point in the book, Pocock recalls joking that the indigenous and non-indigenous peoples of New Zealand could both consider themselves ‘peoples of the ship’. It seems that the direction envisioned by Pocock and others in the volume would involve multi-national or multi-cultural populations becoming ‘peoples of the table’ — committed to a life of perpetual negotiation concerning the relationship of the state and indigenous populations.



The book's approach, insofar as it seeks to draw on actual experience with the problems of legitimacy in the face of indigenous claims, strikes me as the right way to approach this question. And the editors have assembled an impressive range of voices on the subject. One of the most memorable contributions, for instance, involves a first-hand account of how membership issues arise and are experienced in a Quebec Mohawk community. This contribution — by Audra Simpson — is striking for two reasons. First because it breaks with the standard model of theoretical discourse and takes an imaginative, open-ended approach to the issues involved. In fact, I would have liked to see Simpson spend less time defending her methodology and more time employing it, especially given that this imaginative, open-ended stance is precisely what is called for elsewhere in the book.

Second, and more importantly, Simpson's account of the tragic side of membership issues (who gets counted *out*, as well as in) is one of the few places in the book where I felt the more difficult aspects of the debate on indigenous rights were given sustained attention. This is a drawback in a volume that takes on this contentious topic. While I would by and large line up with the viewpoints articulated in the book, it makes me uneasy that those who have reservations about indigenous rights are not given space in the volume. Their viewpoints are certainly raised by the editors and other contributors, but it minimizes the power of these issues if such concerns are not advanced by their own advocates. Indigenous rights confront us with difficult questions about membership, cultural promulgation, personal autonomy and what is owed between citizens of a joint political project, and not everyone is convinced that expanding rights and accommodation is the best approach. By giving this perspective only second-hand representation, the discussion is left with a hollowed-out feeling.

Perhaps what was most striking for me about the volume, however, was that it presents a version of political theory that advises us to proceed by practice rather than principle — to enter negotiations and to get to work on new institutional forms and legal orders of which we cannot yet foresee the shape. It tells us what we should *not* expect (the old standards of national unity or singular, undivided sovereign statehood) but not how to proceed, except in good faith and with an open mind. It seems that theory, because of its tendency to fetishize certain concepts, is best kept subordinate to practice in the development of indigenous rights.

It may be that this volume represents a new theoretical stance — perhaps a kind of 'learn-by-doing' type of theory — yet if so it needs to be more explicitly stated. Challenging over-rigid ideas and institutions is a significant task, yet so is identifying the principles that should inform the development of new ones. Finding our old systems wanting, we may opt to take a new direction based on discussions and encounters with the many political traditions that populate



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multi-cultural or multi-nation states, but this is not an untheoretical or even an a-theoretical task. I doubt I am at odds with any of the contributors in making this point, but while it is a useful caution to remind us that theoretical concepts should not become political straitjackets, I am left wondering what they believe we *should* expect from theory throughout this process.

This is a thought-provoking volume. It provides a geographically diverse overview of a fundamental political question. Its stated objective is to foster an 'intercultural conversation between indigenous and non-indigenous theorists' (p. 2) and in this regard it is a model for others to follow. But it also raises questions about the role of theory under this new approach and, regrettably, leaves out of the 'conversation' those theorists for whom indigenous rights are not necessarily the answer.

Catherine Frost  
Department of Political Science,  
McMaster University.