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Université Michel de Montaigne Bordeaux 3, 7-10 December, 2011

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International Symposium “Peuples Indigènes et Environnement”

Université Michel de Montaigne Bordeaux 3, 7-10 December, 2011

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- 1 The international symposium “Indigenous Peoples and the Environment” aimed at taking an inventory of the scholarship on indigenous peoples with regard to environmental issues and reflected on the role played by indigenous peoples in the production of discourse and practices regarding the environment. Organized by Lionel Larré and Laurence Machet (CLIMAS), and Antoine Ventura and Verushka Alvizuri (AMERIBER) at the Université Michel de Montaigne, the conference attracted a very interdisciplinary group of scholars¹. The conference itself was opened with welcome speeches and introductory remarks by Patrick Baudry, Vice President of the Conseil Scientifique, Nathalie Jaeck, Director of CLIMAS, and Elvire Gomez-Vidal, Director of AMERIBER.
- 2 The organizers had pointed out the somewhat heated debate on whether or not indigenous peoples had and still have a special relationship with the environment, as represented in the controversy around Shepard Krech’s 1999 work *The Ecological Indian*. It was the purpose of this symposium to move beyond the generalizations about “the indigenous peoples” and their alleged homogeneous relationship to their environments, and instead scrutinize the role these generalizations currently play in our societies. Complementing such observations, the symposium examined how indigenous peoples navigate between economic needs, ecological expectations, pressure from former “colonizing powers”² and from their own traditions, within today’s larger environmental concerns. These aspects were tackled by contributors coming from various academic backgrounds and with very diverse approaches, including anthropology, literature, medical science, sociology, history, creative media and writing, and even entomology. These approaches to the topic were organized into thematic, yet often interdisciplinary workshop sessions.
- 3 In the panel on “Nature and Culture”, Julie Canovas and Julien Barbosa (Université de Bourgogne) and Thibault Martin (Université de Québec en Outaouais) discussed

philosophical traditions of indigenous peoples *vis à vis* perceptions of nature and culture in "Western" societies. They pointed out that the colonizing powers traditionally perceived indigenous peoples as part of nature, and thus uncultured, and explained how this understanding led to expectations about indigenous peoples in terms of environmental issues. The dichotomy between nature and culture turned out to be an underlying theme in many of the following presentations.

- 4 The panel "The Indigenist Ecologist Today" launched the symposium's discussions on perceptions of indigenist stewardship in contemporary societies. Paul C. Rosier (Villanova University) provided an overview on the influence of ecological issues in the development of American Indian political activism. He argued that the focus on ecology helped the activists link with other interest groups beyond race, ethnicity, and national borders. Xavier Amelot, Laurent Couderchet, and Maëva Paupert (Université Bordeaux 3) applied the concept of "indigeneity" to European understandings of ecology in their presentation, pointing out that indigenous peoples' home territories are usually thought of as "habitats." They presented their current comparative research project on how case studies on ecological issues (the Sakalava of Madagascar and the Bourguignon of the Loire region) can employ indigenous perspectives for an examination of ecology that applies general, global notions and principles, and yet preserves a focus on local specifics.
- 5 One panel discussed the "development and manipulation of the indigenous ecologist." It combined case studies on the Chippewa in Minnesota (Marie-Claude Strigler, Université Paris 3), indigenous groups in Brazil (Leandro Varison, Université Paris Sorbonne), and the Mapuche in Chile (Gonzalo Bustamante, Université de Québec).
- 6 In "Representations of the Indigenous Ecologist," panelists scrutinized literary and philosophical senses of the notion of indigenous stewardship. Adriana Sanchez Gutierrez (Université de Montréal) looked at poetry by Fredy Chikangana to explain the interrelation of nature and its human inhabitants in Yanakuna culture. Bertrand Guest (Université Bordeaux 3) revealed how non-Native philosophers from different cultures and political backgrounds such as Thoreau and Reclus applied stereotypical contemporary notions of indigenous ideas of nature in their development of the humanities as much as in Utopian discourse. Justin Romick (Université Bordeaux 3) presented a study on how the writer William Gilmore Simms co-opted the constructed image of Native Americans in harmony with nature for his representation of white South Carolinians as anti-industrialist agrarians in his 1835 *The Yemassee*.
- 7 "The Economics and the Indigenous Ecologist" presented two case studies on current economic developments and their repercussions for local ecology and understanding of nature. Susan Merrell (journalist, Australia) explained how the state of Papua-New Guinea, although trying to adhere to the customs and needs of its indigenous population, is forced to develop exploitative extractive industries in order to save its major sources of income. Lindsey Claire Smith (Oklahoma State University) presented her work on the American organic grocery store chain "Whole Foods", arguing that such stores proactively use "eco-iconography" and indigenous imagery to promote their products. At the same time, they represent the "disconnect" between food producers and the increasingly urban and affluent consumers who are attracted by the store's philosophy and offers.
- 8 The morning sessions of the second day focused on representations of the interrelation between indigenous peoples and environmental issues in the mass media and fiction. In

the first panel, Erika Thomas (Université de Lille) discussed documentary films from Brazil. Johanna Feier (Technical University of Dortmund) observed how feature films and documentaries about Alaska perpetuate, and sometimes subvert, stereotypes of Native Alaskans as intrinsic stewards of nature. Lee Schweninger (University of North Carolina, Wilmington) used the 1989 film *Powwow Highway* to contextualize the controversy over Makah whaling and other fishing rights issues in the Northwest. Mathieu Lacoue-Labarthe (Université Paris 8) interpreted changes in US-American perspectives on Native Americans in fiction during the second half of the 20th century as reflections of non-Native approaches to the environment. Discussing Brazilian indigenous literature, Héloïse Behr (Université Paris 3) observed a conscious application of the nature/city dichotomy and of ecological native imagery in poetry mainly directed at non-native audiences. Susan Barrett (Université Bordeaux 3) presented a comparison of traditional and modern indigenous storytelling in contemporary Australia and their impact on non-indigenous understanding of the environment.

- 9 Venturing into the field of entomology, the next session used case studies involving insects to discuss indigenous relationships with the environment. Biologist Alain Thiéry (Université Aix-Marseille) examined the use of insects in indigenous societies of South America and Oceania for food, medicine, and religious ceremony. Fabio Flores (UNAM) discussed how the cyclic occurrence of locust infestations in the ancient Mayan empire influenced agricultural practice and medicine, and how it was incorporated into the cultural and ceremonial cycle of the people.
- 10 In a presentation on environmental practice, Ezequiel Zarate Toledo (Université Paris 3 Sorbonne Nouvelle) looked at land claims and land rights struggles in the province of Oaxaca, Mexico, fettered by effects of globalization, namely over government plans for wind energy.
- 11 The section on "spiritualism" combined historical and contemporary case studies. Frank Usbeck (University of Leipzig) discussed the interrelations of nationalism, constructions of collective memory, and naturalism in the German euphoria for Native Americans and in the Nazis' treatment and perception of indigenous peoples. Corinne David (Université Rennes 2) presented a study on the New Zealand flora and fauna treaty ("Wai 262") and the repercussions of notions of guardianship on Maori political discourse. Raeschelle Potter-Deimel (Vienna) discussed the persistent environmental ritual system among the Tunica-Biloxi of Louisiana and their recent successful economic development that was supported by the Army Corps of Engineers and consonant with traditional environmental standards.
- 12 Two studies from the US Northwest and from New Zealand focused on animism in current environmental-economic issues: Dean P. S. Mahuta (Auckland University of Technology) presented his work on how, despite repeated land sessions, the Waikato people have preserved their cultural identity linked to the Waikato River, and how the 2010 Settlement Act provided for co-management and shared guardianship of the river between the Waikato people and the government. Andrew H. Fisher (The College of William and Mary) explored tensions within tribal communities along the Columbia River Basin over river development and Western science and technology regarding the importance of salmon in regional traditional religion.
- 13 Keynote speaker Astrid Ulloa (Universidad Nacional de Colombia) introduced a study on environmental discourse in the Colombian Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta.

Emphasizing the interplay of global, national, and local interests and policies, Astrid Ulloa pointed out the cultural and environmental politics of regional indigenous groups to reconcile their own traditions with economic, political and environmental pressures and interests from outside.

- 14 The last day of the conference started with sessions on the political-ecological discourse and on mining issues in indigenous territory. Jana Jetmarova (University of Pardubice) examined a paradox in current Bolivian politics: on the one hand, the government decreed a national policy based on indigenous concepts of nature and morality but, on the other hand, it experiences the economic need to finance these new policies through the exploitation of natural resources. She therefore questioned the notion of an "indigenous ecological neosocialism" in Bolivia. Suzy Basile (Université du Québec en Abitibi Tésquamingue) examined the role of indigenous women in environmental governance and activism in Canada. Diana Sarrade Cobos (Université Bordeaux 4) discussed environmental debates in Ecuador and examined the formation of inter-indigenous activist organizations whose lobbying and proposals have led the national government to include Nature Rights into its constitution in 2008.
- 15 In the second morning session, mining on indigenous lands was approached from different angles. Deborah Jackson-Taffa (University of Iowa) used a very personal, reflective account to familiarize the audience with the implications of economic needs versus ecological requirements. She argued that, in participating in uranium mining and thus helping exploit his reservation's resources, her father and his co-workers enabled the development of a new generation of Navajos and Pueblos who have the awareness, the means and the skills to interweave environmental protection and economic development in the Four Corners region. Adding to these observations, Aaron Carr (author and documentary filmmaker) presented recent documentary material on the struggle among Navajo people over the exploitation of the immense mineral wealth on the reservation. Navajo people and tribal government work on approaches to preserve traditional values and accommodate the economic needs of both the tribe and the national economy. Susanne Berthier-Foglar (Université de Savoie) expanded this discussion by pointing out inter-ethnic conflicts over the issues of economic opportunity versus environmental protection. Her study examined Hispanic and Native American communities in New Mexico who follow conflicting approaches to mining near Mt. Taylor, while both groups cite cultural identity as an argument to pursue their interests.
- 16 Both plenary sessions on the last day of the conference emphasized biodiversity. Philippe Barthélémy (Université Bordeaux 2) scrutinized how recent developments in the pharmaceutical industry towards more traditional methods, particularly in phytotherapy, stimulated a heightened interest in indigenous practices and herbal knowledge, but also an increased demand for the production of healing plants, which has repercussions for indigenous agricultural methods and biodiversity on indigenous lands. Thomas Burelli (Université d'Ottawa) discussed problems of maritime and coastline biodiversity among indigenous peoples in French overseas territories.
- 17 The conference was concluded by parallel sessions on "Staging Identities" and on "Nation-building and Environment". In the former, Frédéric Dorel (École Centrale de Nantes) presented a study of tourism on Native American reservations. He pointed out that Native people have become active in utilizing as much as deconstructing non-Native founding myths and stereotypes of the nature/culture dichotomy to preserve,

proclaim and re-define their own cultural identities. Véronique Antomarchi (Inalco) looked at the growing activity and engagement among the Inuit in the establishment of national parks in Nunavik. She described these activities as rooted in Inuit cultural concepts of sharing.

- 18 In the session on nation-building, Enrique Cortes Larravide (Université Paris 3 and Universidad de Chile) provided a historical case study of the Copiapo people in the Chilean Atacama Desert. He described how the struggle for control over the Copiapo River influenced not only the fragile ecosystem of the region, but also had repercussions on the cultural identity of the local natives at the end of the 18th century. Ronald Soro Quiros (Université Bordeaux 3) presented a study on the development of cultural and ethnic diversity in Costa Rica as a result of the displacement of weaker indigenous groups from the more fertile and habitable areas of the country during the 19th century. He examined the myths created around these so-called "guatusos" in the development of a Costa Rican national identity.
- 19 The full conference program can be found on: <http://climas.u-bordeaux3.fr/index.php/colloques/colloques-a-venir/1-peuples-indigenes-et-environnement>

NOTES

1. This symposium also marked the public launching of a larger research project at Bordeaux, Toulouse, and Marseilles, sponsored by the Institut des Amériques Pôle Sud-Ouest and the Conseil Régional Aquitaine. In this three-year project, environmental issues affecting indigenous peoples will be further discussed in a number of case studies involving the Americas, but also Australia, New Zealand and Oceania, and lay the ground for an inclusion of Africa and Europe.

2. In the international debates on indigenous self-determination, particularly in regard to the UN and the declaration of the rights of indigenous peoples, the term "internal colonialism" is often used to describe the mechanisms of power and policies toward indigenous peoples in settler states. In that sense, the US or Australia would be counted as colonizing powers, as well.

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Thèmes : Actualité de la recherche

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