# Who’s a Settler Colonialist Now?

There has been a lot of attention paid of late to exactly who are indigenous people in some area, and who are not. The people who came after the indigenous people are often referred to as engaged in “settler colonialism.”

But why should we care about who qualifies as “indigenous” in some place and who doesn’t? Well, the basic idea is that the indigenous people were there first, and some other group came along later, and pushed them aside. In recognition for having suffered an historical injustice, the indigenous people are entitled to certain rights and protections, or so the prevalent theory goes.

So, then, who is indigenous? My Merriam-Webster dictionary has the following definition: “indigenous: of or relating to the earliest known inhabitants of a place…”

This is a simple, fairly straightforward definition to apply. Of course, given new archaeological evidence, we might find that some previously unknown inhabitants had been in some locale before the people who up till then had been thought to be the indigenous population. But we would not expect that to happen very often. So it should be fairly easy to decide just who is indigenous, and who a settler colonist, right?

However, I was recently at a lecture on Austronesian culture. The lecturer mentioned that the Philippines were first settled 47,000 years ago. The Austronesians arrived on the islands 4000 years ago and almost completely displaced the people who had been there. (The original inhabitants left their trace in the “Negritos” of the islands, who, nevertheless, have mixed with Austronesians and speak Austronesian languages.) Yet several times later in the lecture she referred to the artifacts produced by the Austronesians as “indigenous” Filipino culture.

This is curious: weren’t the ancestors of the Negritos the indigenous people of the Phillipines? And doesn’t the Austronesian takeover of the archipelago fit the “settler colonialism” concept to a T? After all, the Austronesians wiped out the indigenous culture so thoroughly that not one of the indigenous languages survives.

In Southern Africa, as Wikipedia notes, “[Southwards moving Bantu people] displaced, conquered, and absorbed the original [i.e., indigenous] Khoisan, Khoikhoi and San peoples.” Dutch settlers often allied with the indigenous people resisting Bantu incursions. Nevertheless, several paragraphs later, Wikipedia describes the people living in South Africa as the Dutch, the English, and the indigenous people… despite the fact that many of the people lumped into the indigenous category were recent invaders attempting to subjugate the people who were actually indigenous by the Merriam-Webster definition!

Celtic people (including my ancestors) only arrived in Ireland in roughly the third millennium BC, largely displacing the culture of the existing inhabitants of the island, which had been settled several thousand years earlier. Again, the Celts would appear to be, by any neutral definition, classic “settler colonialists.” But bizarrely, a group of people that only split off from mainstream Irish culture in about 1600, the Travellers, are now deemed “indigenous.” (See https://public-history-weekly.degruyter.com/10-2022-2/unsilencing-indigenous-ireland/) Their claim to being indigenous seems to mostly rest on the fact that the rest of the Irish population, whose ancestors generally arrived at just the same time as those of the Travellers, don’t particularly fancy them.

All of the languages of northern India are languages of invading Indo-Europeans, who migrated to an area that had already given birth to the Indus Valley civilization. The subcontinent was then invaded again by nomadic Muslims. The British were the third main invading culture to dominate India. But in another weird twist, the Muslim people of Kashmir are now being termed “indigenous,” while Hindus are being accused of settler colonialism in the area. (See https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/dech.12809.)

The arbitrariness of many of the uses of “indigenous” and “settler colonialism” demonstrates that these terms are not being employed in any objective or impartial manner. (Indeed, my suggestion that they ought to be used impartially will probably be accused of forwarding the settler colonialist concept of “impartiality.”) Instead of being founded in serious intellectual analysis of the situations under consideration, they are instead pieces of partisan propaganda: in some conflict, just designate the side you favor as “indigenous,” and the side you don’t like as “settler colonialist,” and… you win! And, in fact, the UN has formally declared its adherence to this sort of arbitrary standard: “There is no singularly authoritative definition of indigenous peoples… In fact… articles 9 and 33 state that indigenous peoples and individuals have the right to belong to an indigenous community or nation, in accordance with the traditions and customs of the community or nation concerned, and that they have the right to determine their own identity.” So, per the UN, being “indigenous” is simply a matter of identifying oneself as indigenous… and now you have extra rights your fellow citizens lack. I think I might self-identify as an indigenous resident of South Carolina, and see if I can get some discounts at Piggly Wiggly, or a few free tickets to a Clemson football game.

The importance tied to the issue of just who is indigenous, and who is a settler colonialist, has been raised to even greater prominence by the current conflict in Gaza, where both sides try to contend they are “more indigenous” than the other. That such a question could possibly have any definitive answer in a region like the Middle East, the history of which has been characterized by thousands and thousands of years of conquests and migrations, is ridiculous: both the Israelis and the Palestinians in the area most likely have some ancestors who were in the area millenia ago, and some ancestors who were more recent invaders of the land. To invoke “settler colonialism” in this conflict is an attempt to avoid serious consideration of what a just resolution of the present dispute might entail, and instead play the “I’m more indigenous than you” card as a trump.

The paths of men are twisted, and any attempt to draw a simple morality play out of that tangle must do violence to historical reality. Every single one of us has ancestors who did something terrible to some other people, as well as ancestors who were victims of something terrible having been done to them. How could we possibly apportion guilt amongst the earth’s present population based on what their ancestors were up to, when every single family tree will contain innumerable oppressors and oppressed? However much we might wish to undo all settler colonialism, we can’t possibly put everyone back where they “came from,” or all eight billion of us will have to crowd into East Africa. We can’t restore all lands to their original inhabitants: who will get, for instance, the Philippines? Should we assign ownership based upon what percentage of Negrito DNA each person has?

We cannot make the past more just than it was: it lies beyond our reach. It is only the future that we can make more just. And I suggest that trying to assign blame to living people for things done by their remote ancestors is a barrier, rather than a step, towards doing so.