

Constructions of Indigeneity in Urban Spaces: Local Adaption of a Global Idea?

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All human beings are somehow indigenous, all human beings are from this planet.¹

What makes a space indigenous? This was one of the core questions I had to struggle with, while working on a project about the Americas and “indigenous mapping.” The search for an answer led to the questions: who defines indigenous or indigeneity and which functions and meanings are visible behind these definitions? During the research for these definitions, one of the (maybe not surprising) results was that the meanings of indigeneity are changing. Depending on the context, those changes can even lead to a contradictory meaning. In this work I will analyze a time period in which changes on different spatial levels became visible.

At first glance, there seems to be a global change in “the discourse” about indigeneity. Mainly in the 1990s, but into the new century also, an interruption is visible in international spaces: like the United Nations and the International Labor Organization; as well as in transnational spaces: like in the representations of a large and diverse scale of non-governmental organizations and social movements. More or less during the same time, local changes are visible. During the last three decades, local communities have presented themselves and their claims as “indigenous.”²

This work will analyze two specific spaces in which indigeneity is constructed. For the analysis of an international space, the example of the International Labor Organization (ILO) will be used. The ILO convention 169 had an especially remarkable influence on international debates beyond the organization itself. The limitation to just one organization leads inevitably to a simplification of global dynamics. The influences of NGOs, lobbyist groups and the United Nations as a network will be described in a short overview. An analysis of the interaction of all those forces, participating in the creation of meanings of indigeneity would not fit into one article.³ In the same way, the focus on international and local debates simplifies the networks that exist between the spatial levels. For example, national narratives strongly influence local debates, and the analyzed international organization is formed by governments of nation-states. The simplifications are made, to point out central interactions between spatial levels, to identify the political meaning of indigeneity, whereas it is not intended to analyze all the participating forces.

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¹ Yaotl, Personal Interview, Los Angeles, August 18, 2012.

² These groups reach from local groups like the Zapatistas up to national projects like Evo Morales political representations in Bolivia.

³ A good and compact overview of the interaction between trans- and international organizations that work with the concept of Indigeneity is Virginia Q. Tilley, “New Help or New Hegemony? The Transnational Indigenous Peoples’ Movement and ‘Being Indian’ in El Salvador,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34 (2002): 525–554.

In the next part the political use of indigeneity in the concrete local space Los Angeles will be in focus. Therefore, the positions of music groups like Aztlán Underground and the Olmeca Collective will be described. The music is a mix of hip-hop, jazz, punk and funk. Most of their songs are in English and Spanish; Aztlán Underground also sings a few in Nahuatl. They are involved in different political activities and will be seen as actors in a broader network. Especially for this part, it is important to keep in mind that the focus is not on the question of if or how indigenous people are included in or excluded from society but the question of how the concept of indigeneity is used and how meaning is given to it. The last part will focus on the contradictions and similarities of the functionalization of indigeneity in these two spaces. For a basic understanding of indigeneity as a concept, this work begins with a compact overview of the theoretical debates about its meaning.

Understandings of Indigeneity and its Functions

Throughout history, indigeneity had always been a political tool. Invented during the conquest of the colonies to legitimize a separation between earlier and the new inhabitants, and continuing through the first ideas of independence, indigeneity is more than only a description of skin color/biology (race) or language groups/culture (ethnicity). It forms a part of ideas about nation and defines the difference between Europe and Latin America. It is also a strategy to exclude people from society or give hierarchical structures to societies.

For a basic understanding, the beginnings of the concept have to be taken in account. The image of the indigenous as a homogeneous group is strongly bonded to colonization by Europeans. Only from the perspective of the arriving conquerors was there just one group of people living in the Americas (as other regions). Therefore, the category “Indian” was a relative concept from the beginning. It described non-Christians and non-Europeans, which to Europeans meant uneducated and underdeveloped. Andrew Canessa argues that even now, indigeneity is defined in opposition to non-indigeneity⁴ and deduces that a historic injustice is always included in the meaning of the concept. This injustice is pointed out by James Clifford in his analysis of the discursive power of indigeneity in Bolivia. Clifford describes the injustice with the fictive quote “we were here before you,”⁵ and Canessa expands this quote to a concrete claim: “my people were here before yours and are therefore legitimate occupiers of this land.”⁶

Following these explanations, indigeneity is an expression for “being conquered” but in the case of Latin America there is another element, which stays meaningful in the understanding of indigeneity. Clifford’s “before” expresses a pre-conquest authenticity, not just an existence. Francesca Merlan names it as “local tradition,”⁷ and Pelican identifies a “romanticized originality” which points out that this authenticity is discursively produced.⁸ Escárcega goes even further and

⁴ Andrew Canessa, “The Past is not Another Country: Exploring Indigenous Histories in Bolivia,” *History and Anthropology* 19 (2008): 354.

⁵ James Clifford, “Varieties of Indigenous Experience: Diaspora, Homelands, Sovereignities,” in *Indigenous Experience Today*, ed. Marisol de la Cadena and Orin Starn (New York: Berg, 2007), 197.

⁶ Andrew Canessa, “The Past is not Another Country: Exploring Indigenous Histories in Bolivia,” 353.

⁷ Francesca Merlan, “Indigeneity Global and Local,” *Current Anthropology* 50 (2009): 304.

⁸ Michaela Pelican, “Umstrittene Rechte indigener Völker: das Beispiel der Mbororo in Nordwestkammerun,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 135 (2010): 42.

identifies a “strategic essentialization.”⁹ All these descriptions point out that the meaning of indigeneity in international debates is based on imagined pureness and authenticity.

In short, this category gets its meaning in relation to the outside, or the non-indigenous, and changes its meaning depending on the context. Therefore, indigeneity is extremely flexible. On the other hand, indigeneity stands for a constant, unchangeable over time, authentic, and pure. A look at the changes in the 1990s shows that these contradictions have an impact on the political potential of the concept. The relativeness gives a flexibility that can fit different social, political, or economic conditions, whereas the idea of authenticity legitimizes different claims and positions.

The historians Christian Büschges and Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka describe changes of use and meaning of ethnicity as the “ethnization of the political.”¹⁰ With this expression they point out modifications of paradigms in political debates. What they outline in their work is that the ethnization is not just a Latin American phenomenon but a global one, visible in very different places and spaces throughout the world.¹¹ It also becomes clear that a new dynamic of politicization is not limited to indigeneity but applicable to ethnic categories in general. Additionally Comaroff and Comaroff made quite clear that these inter- and transnational debates about ethnicity influence not just political representations but also economic structures, visible, for example, in so-called eco-tourism.¹²

Nevertheless, indigeneity develops a special meaning during the described ethnization of the political. Jenny Reardon and Kim TallBear show in their analysis of the history of anthropology that indigeneity stayed outside the regular race debates of the 20th century because it was seen as a somehow parallel existing pre-modernity.¹³ Olaf Kaltmeier concludes that movements which refer to indigenously defined representations in the 1990s can refer to “the best organized critiques against neoliberal politics in Latin America.”¹⁴ As other authors point out, indigeneity should not be analyzed as an isolated political strategy,¹⁵ but in conclusion there are few doubts about the fact that the concept has a high political value based on a special position in the debates about ethnicities. Choque Capuma analyzes this special position as an element included in the concept from the beginning. He describes the reason for this special position as an “exotic element” that gives meaning to the concept as a political tool.¹⁶

Indigeneity in the International Labor Organization

The ILO has a long history of distinguishing “indigenous workers” from “non-indigenous.” Already in 1936 with the convention Recruiting of Indigenous Workers, this separation was

⁹ Sylvia Escárcega, “Indigenous Intellectuals and Activists: From Social Justice to Human Rights” (held at the meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, Dallas, Texas, 2003), 11.

¹⁰ Christian Büschges and Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, ed., *Die Ethnisierung des Politischen: Identitätspolitik in Lateinamerika, Asien und den USA* (Frankfurt a.M. (et al): Campus Verlag GmbH, 2007).

¹¹ *Ibid*, 9.

¹² John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 8.

¹³ Jenny Reardon and Kim TallBear, “‘Your DNA Is Our History’: Genomics, Anthropology, and the Construction of Whiteness as Property,” *Current Anthropology* 53 (2012): 236.

¹⁴ Olaf Kaltmeier, “Vom Nutzen der Ethnizität - Indigene Identitätspolitik und Neoliberalismus in den Anden,” *iz3w: Aufbegehren – die Politik der Indigenität* 303 (2007): 9.

¹⁵ Todd A. Eisenstadt, “Indigenous Attitudes and Ethnic Identity Construction in Mexico,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 22 (2006): 111.

¹⁶ Efrén Choque Capuma, *Crisis de la identidad indígena* (Oruru: Ulinku, 2008), 12.

written down in an official document, even if there was not yet a clear definition of this group.¹⁷ The convention's rules show that indigeneity was related to underdevelopment or even low mental abilities, visible, for example, in the fact that the indigenously defined people were excluded from the decision of whether they were recruitable.¹⁸ Here the ILO reproduced a typical image of "non-white" races, which can be seen as an expression of the central function of race in society – constructing hierarchical classifications.

Aside from the fact that the convention draws an image of a dependent group of people, the image defines the group based on "tribe culture." The idea of a "tribe" is a pre-modern group of people who come together mainly to secure nutrition and survival.¹⁹ Article 5 posits that a responsible person should examine "the possible effects of the withdrawal of adult males on the health, welfare and development of the population concerned, particularly in connection with the food supply." This discourse remains visible in the convention C064 from 1939, which regulates – among other things - how the "Indigenous Workers" will be sent home when the work is done. For example, article 15.3 states: "When the workers have to make long journeys in groups they shall be convoyed by a responsible person."²⁰

The workers are portrayed as dependent and irresponsible, and the subtext is that they cannot find their own way to their destination. This detailed explanation of taking and bringing back shows that indigeneity is somehow far away. It is on the periphery of the work places and industrialized society.. In the convention 107, Indigenous and Tribal Populations, (1957), the ILO for the first time writes down a definition of "indigenous" and develops a convention that goes beyond workers' rights regulations.²¹ In contrast to the regular topic of the ILO, this convention regulates living conditions with a look at community dynamics and traditions. Indigenously defined people are seen as an ethnic group whose culture is "less advanced." In fact, the underdevelopment is a core element of the definition. Article 1 specifies whom the convention concerns, starting with "members of tribal or semi-tribal populations in independent countries whose social and economic conditions are at a less advanced stage than the stage reached by the other sections of the national community, and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations."²²

Based on this definition it is not surprising that the aims of the convention are focused on the assimilation of these groups into the national societies. Article 2 states: "Governments shall have the primary responsibility for developing coordinated and systematic action for the protection of the populations concerned and their progressive integration into the life of their respective countries."

¹⁷ C050 - Recruiting of Indigenous Workers Convention, 1936 (No.50): Convention concerning the Regulation of Certain Special Systems of Recruiting Workers. (Entry into force: September 8, 1939). Adoption: Geneva, 20th ILC session (20 June 1936) - Status: Shelved Convention (Technical Convention).

¹⁸ C050, Article 5.

¹⁹ Especially out of Africa but also beyond, the problematic use of the term "tribe" is discussed. For example: <http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-19-spring-2001/feature/trouble-tribe>, accessed November 13, 2013.

²⁰ C064 - Contracts of Employment (Indigenous Workers) Convention, 1939 (No. 64). Convention concerning the Regulation of Written Contracts of Employment of Indigenous Workers (Entry into force: July 08, 1948) Adoption: Geneva, 25th ILC session (27 June 1939) - Status: Shelved convention (Technical Convention).

²¹ C107 - Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention, 1957 (No. 107). Convention concerning the Protection and Integration of Indigenous and Other Tribal and Semi-Tribal Populations in Independent Countries (Entry into force: June 02, 1959) Adoption: Geneva, 40th ILC session (June 26, 1957) - Status: Outdated instrument (Technical Convention).

²² C107, Article 1, (a)

The equating of indigeneity and tribal culture in this convention can be seen as similar to the idea of separation mentioned above. The tribe's social structure is pre-modern, and it lives outside the center of the nation-state's society. The interaction of time and space in the definition sets indigeneity outside the conventional urban vs. rural dichotomy, even if members of the tribe farm. Thus the idea that underdevelopment can be overcome separates the 1957 convention from those developed in the 1930s. The biological separation seems to be replaced by a more flexible (cultural) separation. The concept of indigeneity becomes a label for a specific way of life and therefore an ethnic label.

Aside from the description of indigeneity as inferior in convention 107, one can also find influences from the Declaration of Philadelphia from 1944,²³ especially in Article 2 that deals with questions about freedom and dignity. But a closer look at article 2.3 might explain how the assimilation might go together with these ideas of freedom and dignity. The article says: "The primary objective of all such action shall be the fostering of individual dignity, and the advancement of individual usefulness and initiative." Doubtless, the idea of general human rights influenced this convention. The question is whether this can be seen as an enhancement of indigeneity. It seems more like a separation between the individual human and the concept of indigeneity if we take into account that indigeneity is highly related to "living in tribes" and thus to a *collective*. Therefore, the general respect for *individual* dignity does not stand for a new perspective on indigeneity.

In 1989, convention 107 was reformed – convention 169, Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, was still in force.²⁴ The definition the ILO developed there is the basis for NGOs, partly for the UN and for the "development aid" of states. Probably the most important change is that the idea of assimilation is dropped in this definition and the claim to protect "authentic cultures" became dominant instead. In 1989, Article 1 states: "This convention applies to: (a) tribal peoples in independent countries whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community." The replacement of "less-advanced" with "distinguish" seems to express a different valuation of indigeneity, but the strong "othering" remains visible. It is likely that these changes were related to a fundamentally new perspective on industrialization and modernity. Starting slowly in the 1970s and with a "boom time" after the end of the Cold War, there were debates about the environment and its protection in transnational and international organizations. Related to these debates, critical positions against the formerly dominant discourses about the benefits of economic and technical modernization developed a growing importance. Therefore "cultures" like indigeneity that were seen as "related to nature" or at least as "before modernization" were enhanced.²⁵ Their supposed exclusion from modernization does not stand just for underdevelopment any longer but for an alternative to now criticized economic and technological development. This idea is linked to the idea, that indigeneity on an international level

²³ Declaration concerning the Aims and Purposes of the International Labour Organisation, adopted at the 26th session of the ILO, Philadelphia, May 10, 1944. This declaration is an annex to the founding constitution of the ILO. It is focused on the inclusion of general human rights in the international regulation of workers' rights.

²⁴ C169 - Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169) Convention concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries (Entry into force: September 05, 1991) Adoption: Geneva, 76th ILC session (June 27, 1989) - Status: Up-to-date instrument (Technical Convention).

²⁵ Miguel Olmos Aguilera, *Antropología de las fronteras: Alteridad, historia e identidad mas alla de la linea* (Tijuana: Miguel Angel Porrua, 2007), 552.

seems to be related to specific moral standards, related to the environment.²⁶ In conclusion, it is not the perspective on indigeneity but the valuation of the outside that changed.

The diversity of actors who follow the idea of indigeneity as living in and with nature can be seen best in 1992 in Rio, where numerous NGOs and the UN came together at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development to talk about global problems of development, environment, and sustainability. In two of the five final documents of this “Earth Summit,” indigeneity gets special attention. Especially in Agenda 21, where different claims and plans for the future were collected, the entanglement of discourses about environmental protection and indigeneity becomes visible. Agenda 21 talks of achieving “a better understanding of indigenous people's knowledge and management-experience related to the environment, and applying this to contemporary development challenges.” In the context of constructivist debates and already more critical debates about race and ethnicity, the ILO and NGOs came in 1992 to the conclusion to reproduce racial and ethnic stereotypes almost without further questions. Especially in the ILO but also at the Earth Summit, these descriptions were still made by outsiders. Hence a large group of Europeans and North Americans defined the meaning of “the (homogenized) others.”

This new perspective helped and protected rural societies worldwide, which is clearly a positive effect of these debates. But a deeper analysis of the discourses and consequences yields a different conclusion. The problems evident in the theoretical analysis have negative effects in practice. The international debates seem to support the saying, “The way to hell is paved with good intentions.”²⁷

For example, Virginia Tilley described the idea of authenticity as problematic. On the one hand, indigeneity is defined as authentic and in this form unique. On the other hand, we can see a homogenization of indigenously defined people by proclaiming that they share a way of life. Aside from this contradiction, the uniqueness and authenticity go back to a race concept, to the idea of protecting “pure races.” Tilley describes this idea as an image of an isolated race.²⁸ A similar problem is described by Eric Wolf when he talks about “the people without history.”²⁹ If we understand history as interactions, changes, or stories over time, it is this absence of history, which is seen in the construction of an isolated pure race that exists outside current time and networks. In communities’ struggles around the globe, the definition shows its weaknesses. Tilley analyzes the case of El Salvador, where communities are fighting for their right to define themselves as indigenous.³⁰ Michaela Pelican describes a similar conflict in Cameroon, where the Mbororo are struggling for their right of self-determination.³¹ In both cases, the communities' wish to be seen

²⁶ Merlan, “Indigeneity Global and Local,” 308.

²⁷ This article is based on a presentation at the University of Texas, Arlington. During the following debate, the question came up, what the intentions of the ILO might be in my opinion. Therefore I want to outline, that I do believe in good intentions of this organization. In fact, this international organization might be one of the very few places where some of the serious social problems around the world can be solved. But in my opinion, these solutions are based on controversial dialogues. The power of an organization like the ILO but also the UN in a broader understanding has is the creation and formation of ideas and discourses. In the moment when we stop criticizing and analyzing these ideas, this form of power is lost. The intention of this article is not to deny good intentions or to illegitimize the ILO but rather to reflect on the ongoing debates about indigeneity.

²⁸ Virginia Q. Tilley, “New Help or New Hegemony? The Transnational Indigenous Peoples’ Movement and ‘Being Indian’ in El Salvador,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34, 3 (2002): 527.

²⁹ See Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

³⁰ See Tilley, “New Help or New Hegemony?”

³¹ Michaela Pelican, “Umstrittene Rechte indigener Völker: das Beispiel der Mbororo in Nordwestkamerun”, *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 135 (2010): 39–60.

as indigenous is not accepted by the state or international community because of a supposed lack of authenticity. The influences of other communities, hybrid traditions and languages, seen as regular cultural dynamics in other contexts, are here seen as destructive of indigeneity.

As shown at the beginning of this article, the arguments on which the changes in the perspective on indigeneity are rooted is the recognition of a historical injustice or crime committed by the Europeans during the conquest of the Americas. Andrew Canessa described the argument with the quote “we were here before you.” But with a look at the international discourses, the quote might rather be “they were there before us” and to stay with the claim, Canessa formulated related to the quotes - “and therefore we might give them some land back.”

Indigeneity in a Local Space

Still, even if indigeneity is placed in the periphery and in a parallel, ahistorical pre-modernity, the new debates gave a discursive power to communities defined as indigenous. The question is how this power is taken in different local contexts. The examples in El Salvador and Cameroon show that it is not that easy to access to this discursive power if a community does not fit into constructions of pureness and authenticity.

I picked Los Angeles as a local space because it shows clear changes and reconfigurations on the ground. As a very urban and globally networked space, it is the opposite of what is imagined as an “indigenous space” in the global discourse. Los Angeles is not on the periphery but one of the biggest urban centers in the US. The described actors in such a context do not try to fit exactly into global definitions but make the discourse fit their living conditions.

By examining the music groups Aztlán Underground and Olmeca Collective this article will try to identify some of the transformations and new meanings. It also becomes clear that the international debates influence a local understanding of indigeneity. The named groups are of particular interest in this context because of their understanding of their work. Each sees a responsibility to use its visibility on stage for political positioning. Their understanding of music is not only as art and entertainment but also a way to communicate with the audience. They can also be considered part of a new wave of actors who refer to indigenous symbols in their representations. Additionally, they work with political groups and participate in projects like urban gardening, protests against migration laws,³² and autonomous teaching.³³ These activities not only express political involvement but also show that they influence and are influenced by broader networks.

The bands are considered as a new wave of actors because they are clearly not the first political agents to refer to indigeneity in this local context.³⁴ Compared to the international debates or the discourses south of the US, the history of indigeneity in political debates is pretty short. Lauren Basson explains in detail how this invisibility of indigeneity can be explained for the US.³⁵ And already in these non-indigenous discourses, Greg Hise makes clear how Los Angeles historically always had the tendency to “whiten” its representations.³⁶ So not until the late 1960s, in the context

³² For example “the sound strike” against the new migration laws in Arizona

³³ For example at the Southern California Library in Los Angeles.

³⁴ It has to be clear at this point that Los Angeles is in the focus of the work. The conditions in the city are an example for one local context, but they are not transferable to other local contexts in the world, or even in the US. For example the domination of the Chicano Movement over the American Indian Movement in a specific local condition.

³⁵ See Basson, *White Enough to Be American?*

³⁶ Greg Hise, “Border City: Race and Social Distance in Los Angeles”, *American Quarterly* 56, (2004): 547.

of the civil rights movement, did the American Indian Movement, for example, become an audible voice for indigenously defined people in the US. But in Los Angeles, the Chicano Movement, heavily influenced by Mexican nationalism, dominated political discourse about indigeneity from the late 1960s. It became a broad political movement, with dynamic changes and developments over the years, but at this point it is important to focus on how this movement influenced the actors analyzed in this article. Similar to the analysis of international debates, such a simplification cannot do justice to such an active group but can explain some roots of the debates and representations that took place in the 1990s.³⁷

The movement's references to its Aztec or Mixteca heritage dominated the images of indigeneity in Los Angeles. Its well-known symbol is Atzlán – in its original meaning a spatial concept – but other references to these ancient cultures were used too, such as the macuahuitl, a traditional Aztec weapon held by an eagle, and many more. The meaning of these symbols in the late 1960s was highly influenced by the postrevolutionary Mexican nationalism.³⁸ Already the Atzlán, which was a symbol for a new nation – or, for more radical groups, a new nation-state – shows how European concepts of community are reproduced in this context.³⁹ Similar to the Mexican national narratives, indigeneity in the early Chicano Movement was a representation of a memory. Rebecca Earle describes this use of an indigenous heritage as a replacement for the ancient Roman or Greek cultures in Europe.⁴⁰ She identifies it as a strategy to give a cultural value to the community, while reproducing European concepts of nation-states.⁴¹

For the early Chicano Movement, a memory of injustice against the brown race legitimated current resistance but was “outside” or “before” the current fight. The strategy that Clifford describes for indigenous movements in Latin America can be identified in the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles, related to the claim for its own nation-state. Already in the 1980s, this holding on to nationalisms was criticized in the movement.⁴² Inge Baxmann describes the new understanding in the 1980s as the declaration of a “lack of location,” based on the experience that the nation is proved dysfunctional in the realities of the people in a multiethnic and multinational place like Los Angeles.⁴³ Eric Avila sees this new perspective as a broader change, formed by the understanding of the Chicana/os as a diverse community.⁴⁴ It became clear during the 1980s that the old homogenizing representations and identity politics needed to be replaced with representations that stood for both unity and diversity.⁴⁵ As the nationalistic representations in the Chicano Movement

³⁷ Chon A. Noriega, “A compact overview of the movement in relation to Atzlán” in *The Chicano Studies Reader: An Anthology of Atzlán, 1970-2010*, ed. Chon A. Noriega, et al. (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2001); Carlos Enrique Muñoz, “A compact overview of the political development” in *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement*, ed. Carlos Muñoz (London: Verso, 1989).

³⁸ The Mexican indigenismo became a dominant imagination of the Mexican nation. The core element of this nation concept was the idea that “the Mexican” is the result of racial mixing of indigenous and Europeans; see Carlos Enrique Muñoz, *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement* (London: Verso, 1989), 32.

³⁹ A well-known analysis of the concept and its European roots is Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nationen und Nationalismus: Mythos und Realität seit 1780* (Frankfurt am Main: Büchergilde Gutenberg, 1992).

⁴⁰ Earle, Rebecca, *The Return of the Native: Indians and Myth-Making in Spanish America, 1810–1930* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 22.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Probably the most famous critique against national as well as gender border is Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza*, Second Edition (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999).

⁴³ Inge Baxmann, *Mayas, Pochos und Chicanos: die transnationale Nation* (München: Fink, 2007), 119.

⁴⁴ Eric R. Avila, “Decolonizing the Territory,” in Chon A. Noriega, et al. (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 2001), 3-9; 7.

⁴⁵ Dieter Ingenschay, “‘Pepsicoatl’ ‘Nation of Atzlán’ und ‘New World Border,’” *Grenzen der Macht - Macht der*

were identified as one of the problems of exclusion, the indigenous elements, already included as a memory in the early representations, seemed to offer alternative discourses.

The presence of post-colonial debates is easy to identify in these new representations from the 1990s, not just in reference to a long struggle but in the way that formerly essentialist concepts like “nation” and “race” are not taken as “just given” any longer. This is the explanation that Yaotl, the singer of Aztlán Underground, gave in the interview about the band’s name, saying Aztlán is “more of a spiritual rather than a political or a territorial concept ... because when we look at things from the indigenous perspective we don’t believe in borders, right? So, when we don’t believe in borders, we don’t want this kind of nation-state with borders. It is the same thing the white people came up with ... we don’t want that. Ourselves as human beings, this is our idea of Aztlán.”⁴⁶

So what is obvious in this explanation is the consciousness of the problems, the nationalistic and therefore often racist representations provoked in the past. These problems include structural racism based on white supremacy as well the experiences of an illegal immigrant in the US. The new identity politics criticize not just the lack of inclusion of people of color in society but also the general idea of categorizing humans via race and nationality. In the song “Nuestra Tierra,” Olmeca expresses a similar idea: “No quiero ver a mi gente pelear ya más sino juntar las banderas y hacer una no más.” His way to unity depends on understanding history: “Váyame gente tenemos que aprender la historia para crecer como la gente de la profecía.” His frequent references to the Zapatistas underline the fact that he does not refer to the history of the Mexican nation but to the ongoing indigenous struggle in the Americas, autonomous from that of any nation-state project.

The relation to this specific movement out of Chiapas is frequently seen in Los Angeles. Political groups name themselves Zapatista Collective,⁴⁷ shirts with a picture of Subcomandante Marcos are easy to get, and, aside from the use of zapatista symbols, some groups are organizing visits to the southern state of Mexico to learn from the local movement.⁴⁸

When questioned on the biological separation of races, Yaotl made clear that for him this separation “totally subscribes to the white supremacy.” A similar idea is visible in his statement “that all human beings are somehow indigenous, all human beings are from this planet”. So what is expressed here is that indigeneity is seen as a possible overcoming of race-based conflicts in this local space. Choque Capuma sees overcoming of separation already in the idea of indigenismo, even if it is not expressed in the hegemonial national narratives in Mexico. He states that the inclusion of indigeneity in this narrative is an inclusion of a critique against the nation-state as a European concept.⁴⁹

The category “indigenous” that described “the premodern” or “the past” leaves this passive point and becomes a description of active empowerment. In the interview with Yaotl, he referred to the protest in 1999 in Seattle against the World Trade Organization where a diverse coalition of different politically active groups blocked successfully parts of the conference. When I asked him about the meaning of zapatismo as an (originally) indigenously defined movement, he said: “For me, the battle in Seattle was totally inspired by the zapatista model. Because we were able to go to the first conferences for humanity and against neo-liberalism, [...] Instead of confining ourselves to these -isms, either anarchism, or communism rather connected us as human beings in the actual

Grenzen, 2005, 87.

⁴⁶ Yaotl, Personal Interview, August 18, 2012.

⁴⁷ Kara Zugman Dellacioppa, *This Bridge Called Zapatismo: Building Alternative Political Cultures in Mexico City, Los Angeles, and Beyond* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), 129.

⁴⁸ For example the Arma Collective, Los Angeles.

⁴⁹ Capuma, *Crisis de la identidad indígena*, 49.

battles that we are facing, connected as human beings for a better world.” This is also an aspect which Alex Khasnabish outlines in his study *Zapatismo Beyond Borders* when he described how important zapatismo became for the meaning of symbols like the balaclavas and how other left-revolutionary symbols “became indigenous” during the past years.⁵⁰ Olmeca expresses a similar opinion about the movement from Chiapas that initiated an open revolt when neoliberal reforms in the form of NAFTA attacked their local economic structures. In an interview on brownpride.com he referred to the Zapatistas when asked for important influences in his music: “History and stories of resistance motivate me greatly. The Zapatista Movement is part of my life and I have a life commitment to them.”⁵¹

But why talk about a movement from Chiapas when the article claims to explain a situation in Los Angeles? Because at second glance, these local spaces are related to each other. Obviously, the everyday experience of poverty in South Central Los Angeles differs greatly from poverty in the rural regions of Chiapas. But there are similarities when we look at the counterparts in form of international companies, the armed forces of the state (police or military), or the ideology of a neoliberal globalization that can be seen as the dominant economic policy in the Americas after the Cold War.⁵² But the question remains: why do symbols and representations with “indigenous connotations” seem attractive in both cases?

This question is quite complex, and there is no single answer, but we can find hints that might lead to an explanation. First is the period itself. With the end of the Cold War, international politics changed fundamentally. Questions and problems of, as well as voices coming out of, “civil society” (actors aside from nation-states) became important in international spaces.⁵³ An example is the UN Conference on Environment and Development, where representatives of the UN members met with a wide and diverse group of NGOs. But also beyond this meeting, the inclusion of non-governmental actors in debates and decisions, made by this international organization, rapidly rose in the 1990s.⁵⁴ There seem to be similarities to the hope that arose after World War II but, in contrast to the situation in which the UN was founded, in the 1990s specific symbols had lost their legitimacy. Olaf Kaltmeier speaks in this context about a “crisis of representation” for leftist movements worldwide.⁵⁵ Independently of these dynamics, various movements and organizations of indigenously defined people have worked since the middle of the 20th century on strengthening the concept of indigeneity as a political resource.⁵⁶ So when leftist movements worldwide lost their strategies for representation, an alternative discourse was available alongside the growing dominance of neoliberal politics.

The other explanation lies in the living conditions of communities around the globe. There are similarities among them despite different surroundings. There are globalized counterparts in the form of companies and ideas (neoliberal ideologies). These globalized counterparts lead to

⁵⁰ Alex Khasnabish, *Zapatismo Beyond Borders: New Imaginations of Political Possibility* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 8.

⁵¹ <http://www.brownpride.com/articles/article.asp?a=773>, accessed March 14, 2014.

⁵² Olaf Kaltmeier, “Vom Nutzen der Ethnizität - Indigene Identitätspolitik und Neoliberalismus in den Anden,” *iz3w: Aufbegehren – die Politik der Indigenität* 303 (Dezember 2007): 10.

⁵³, Anita Ernstdorfer, “Der Beitrag von NGOs zu den Weltkonferenzen der Vereinten Nationen,” *Arbeitspapiere zu Problemen der Internationalen Politik und der Entwicklungsforschung* 32 (2002): 5.

⁵⁴ For statistics related to the involvement of NGOs in the UN, see: <http://csonet.org>, accessed on March 11, 2014).

⁵⁵ Olaf Kaltmeier, “Vom Nutzen der Ethnizität - Indigene Identitätspolitik und Neoliberalismus in den Anden,” 10.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 7; Tilley speaks in her work about the “Transnational Indigenous People’s Movement” and says that it got a growing importance during the 1970s. Tilley, “New Help or New Hegemony?,” 526.

globalized claims. An example of the similarities between claims in rural and urban spaces is land. An important element of the ILO Convention 169 is the legitimization of the claim of indigenous people to get land (back). The claim “tierra y libertad” (land/earth and freedom) seems on first glance to be limited to rural areas and farmers. In Los Angeles it is hard to find collective or public space which is not consumer-related. The space is extremely privatized, so that the claim “give us our land back” is more than legitimate and needed. The ejidos (collectively used land) in Chiapas is central to the function of the rural communities, but in the same way, a collective place is needed in urban surroundings. Without the public space the citizen becomes invisible, said Marina Peterson in her analysis of the privatization of Los Angeles.⁵⁷

Conclusion

The end of the Cold War led to changes in international politics. Debates in international organizations developed new dynamics which also led to a new visibility of non-governmental organizations. Aside from a new openness, a limitation of political representations that took positions against unlimited capitalist market structures were provoked by the failure of socialist experiments of the 20th century. This combination led to a higher diversity in representations and discourses in which indigeneity turned out to be a useful tool. The described flexibility of the concept led to a broad catalogue of possibly represented claims and critiques, united in one discourse.

On the one hand, the old stereotypes helped link indigeneity to new political ideas. Especially the higher valuation of the environment, an understanding of environmental protection as a global task separate from political ideologies and an emphasis on the injustices or crimes committed by the European conquerors gave a discursive power to the concept. Merlan describes this power as moral: “Indigeneity as it has expanded in its meaning to define an international category is taken to refer to peoples who have great moral claims on nation-states and on international society, often because of inhumane, unequal, and exclusionary treatment.”⁵⁸ As shown above, these great moral claims are based on an image of isolated races or ethnicities, the imagination of “the others” who live outside of societies. Such concepts of pureness and otherness are highly problematic as they are based on a strong racism. Even if they offer a specific kind of protection or discursive power, history didn't show that such power led in the long term to positive changes in societies.

But the third part of the article shows that in contrast to the international discourse, locally adapted indigeneity in Los Angeles leaves this essentialist structure behind. The local adaptation resulted in a transformation of the race concept into an idea of active resistance. The proclaimed idea of authenticity becomes irrelevant in this local space and is replaced by the right to define “on the ground” who is indigenous (and therefore what it means). While the ILO refers to a disappearing race that has to be protected in its purity, the local discourse refers to an upcoming, growing collective. There is a knowledge of the history but the idea itself leaves the pure space of memory and turns into a current fight with growing support. The international debates offer new opportunities, but communities on a local level do not necessarily inscribe themselves completely into this discourse. They are using and transforming the debates. This creative transformation in the local space shows that it is possible to overcome the “new hegemonies,” which for the

⁵⁷ Marina Peterson, “Patrolling the Plaza: Privatized Public Space and the Neoliberal State in Downtown Los Angeles,” *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 35 (2006): 378.

⁵⁸ Merlan, “Indigeneity Global and Local,” 304.

international discourses about indigeneity have to be criticized (see Virginia Tilley, for example), and still have access to power given through this discourse. It is a new functionalization of indigeneity by denying the suppression and separation which is intended in essentialist concepts of race and ethnicity. The local results are at different points contradictory to the intention of the international debates. One reason for this lies in the way indigeneity is defined in the international spaces — or rather how it is “treated” as an essentialist category, not taking into account that these categories are political concepts. But it is this understanding that one can find in the local space and that might over time transfer (at least in parts) into international debates.