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Instrumentalising Indigenous Differences: Modernity's Ultimate Cul-de-Sac

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Instrumentalising Indigenous Differences: Modernity's Ultimate Cul-de-Sac

Abstract: This is a critical examination of the contemporary comprehension of difference, focusing particularly on one of its most violent expressions: the systematic and often brutal instrumentalisation of Indigenous peoples in the wake of mainstream development and the ongoing encroachment upon Indigenous worlds, especially across the American continent. It argues that difference is not an incidental feature of social life but a central mediator of both internal and external relations, shaping how groups respond to one another and how new forms of interaction and conflict emerge. Throughout recent centuries, divergent and frequently antagonistic interpretations of difference – rooted in contrasting ideological and political projects – have collided, revealing the persistent struggle over whose worldview prevails in defining social order. This process unfolds through complex socio-spatial dynamics in which conservative forces have consistently worked to relativise, domesticate, or negate autonomous forms of difference. In doing so, they reinforce entrenched hierarchies and sustain a status quo marked by structural intolerance and deep inequality. Difference does not merely exist within space; it is produced through spatial relations. Its political significance becomes fully intelligible only when examined through the collective and contested production of social space, where groups negotiate, resist and reshape the conditions under which they live. Ultimately, the management, suppression or mobilisation of difference plays a decisive role in structuring contemporary socio-spatial orders, determining who is recognised, who is marginalised and whose worlds are allowed to flourish or are rendered disposable.

Keywords: indifference, social anthropology, indigenous peoples, Hegel, dialectic, development

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Resumen: Este trabajo ofrece un examen crítico de la comprensión contemporánea de la diferencia, con atención particular a una de sus expresiones más violentas: la instrumentalización sistemática —y frecuentemente brutal— de los pueblos indígenas en el contexto del desarrollo hegemónico y el avance sostenido sobre sus mundos, especialmente a lo largo del continente americano. Se sostiene que la diferencia no es un rasgo accidental de la vida social, sino un mediador central tanto de las relaciones internas como externas, que moldea la forma en que los grupos se responden mutuamente y en que emergen nuevas formas de interacción y conflicto. A lo largo de los últimos siglos, interpretaciones divergentes y con frecuencia antagónicas de la diferencia —arraigadas en proyectos ideológicos y políticos contrapuestos— han colisionado, poniendo de manifiesto la lucha persistente por determinar qué cosmovisión prevalece en la definición del orden social. Este proceso se despliega a través de dinámicas socio-espaciales complejas, en las que las fuerzas conservadoras han actuado sistemáticamente para relativizar, domesticar o negar las formas autónomas de diferencia. Al hacerlo, refuerzan jerarquías arraigadas y sostienen un statu quo marcado por la intolerancia estructural y la desigualdad profunda. La diferencia no existe simplemente dentro del espacio; se produce a través de relaciones espaciales. Su significación política solo se vuelve plenamente inteligible cuando se examina a través de la producción colectiva y disputada del espacio social, donde los grupos negocian, resisten y reconfiguran las condiciones en que viven. En última instancia, la gestión, supresión o movilización de la diferencia desempeña un papel decisivo en la estructuración de los órdenes socio-espaciales contemporáneos, al determinar quién es reconocido, quién es marginado y cuyos mundos tienen cabida para florecer o son condenados a la desechabilidad.

Palabras clave: indiferencia, antropología social, pueblos indígenas, Hegel, dialéctica, desarrollo

Difference, Politics and Development

A defining feature of late modernity is the entrenchment of indifference as a governing logic of most local, national and global interactions. It is through a strange rationality that social, economic and spatial heterogeneities are instrumentalised, certain differences are suppressed or obscured, while other are actively produced or intensified. The privileged position of dominant groups – and the persistent subordination of the majority, despite formal equality before the law and the illusion of social mobility – rests on the hegemonic management of socioeconomic and

identitarian distinctions. Subordination presupposes a prior process of inferiorisation, whether grounded in presumed innate traits or strategically attributed characteristics. This cascading hierarchy of inferiority, particularly in relation to ethnicity, gender and class, facilitates the consolidation of indifference as a mode of differentiation.

The resulting socio-spatial configuration is inherently unstable and marked by contradictions across multiple scales, from interpersonal dynamics to international relations. Most individuals and collectives are compelled to conform to the imperatives of economic rationality and technological progress, incorporated as wage labourers and mass consumers while experiencing the systematic suppression of individuality and autonomy, an erosion that ultimately "alters the relation between the rational and the irrational" (Marcuse, 1991, p. 251). Difference, accordingly, becomes appropriated and manipulated through exogenous processes that acquire the status of normative frameworks, thereby effacing the personal and collective attributes valued by the majority. Increasingly, individuals find themselves inhabiting a condition of existential void, becoming desensitised and intellectually dispossessed 'no-thinkers' (Fleming, 2025).

This article offers a critical examination of the *metabolism of difference* in contemporary societies, focusing on one of its most violent manifestations: the systematic instrumentalisation of Indigenous difference through mainstream development and the ongoing expropriation of Indigenous worlds, particularly across the Americas. These dynamics are far from new; they have shaped the entire historical arc of colonisation and nation-building. Already in the early stages of North American industrialisation, Thoreau (2006) questioned the kind of market-oriented spatial order that isolates individuals and estranges them from one another. Throughout the twentieth century, this instrumentalisation of difference deepened, driven by the rise of meritocratic ideology, indebtedness and entrepreneurial individualism. The intensified valorisation of the 'self' and the elevation of personal choice became central to contemporary forms of differentiation. Crucially, the naturalisation of modern, Western socioeconomic norms was made possible only through the systematic marginalisation of alternative forms of sociality and value and through the insertion of populations into a narrow consumerist economy predicated on standardised desires and homogenised characteristics. According to Shaw (2008), the central task confronting political theorists is not simply how to include Indigenous peoples, but how to fundamentally rethink their ontological frameworks

and institutional arrangements so as to avoid ongoing marginalization or re marginalisation.

Since the consolidation of neoliberalism in the 1980s, much of the population has been systematically persuaded to internalise responsibility for their own socioeconomic hardships and to accept entrenched ethnoclass disparities – between bankers and workers, white and Black, men and women, urban and rural populations – as natural features of social life. In this context, instrumentalised differences have hardened into a structural condition underpinning the pervasive indifference that characterises today's profoundly asymmetric global order. Rather than serving as a basis for constructive social convergence, difference is subordinated to a regime of functional indifference that sustains authority and legitimises unequal institutions such as private property, labour markets, capital accumulation and the coercive legal-juridical system. Crucially, feelings of inferiority do not originate within those rendered subordinate; they arise from the perceptions of dominant groups who, through a lens of indifference, position others as inherently lower.

All of this underscores that difference is not a secondary or derivative element of socio-spatial relations, but a constitutive *world-making* force. It is through the management and mobilisation of difference that specific forms of interaction emerge, shaping social life and, ultimately, the production of space itself. There is not merely a world of difference, but rather a world *brought into being through* differences. How individuals and groups perceive, interpret and respond to those marked as different (or not different) either consolidates or destabilises shared social realities. Difference both enables and presupposes socio-spatial relationships and through these encounters additional patterns of interaction sediment, generating ever more complex relational nexuses. As Hall reminds us, differences "constitute 'what we really are'; or rather – since history has intervened – 'what we have become'" (Hall, 1990, p. 225). Crucially, differences are neither static nor linear in their evolution: they may be accentuated, suppressed, or reconfigured according to shifting historical and geographical conjunctures and the interests at stake. Contemporary societies reveal this most starkly through the instrumentalisation of difference by dominant groups who selectively emphasise their own distinctions while degrading or subordinating others. This process not only shapes interpersonal and social relations but actively produces a world structured around Western politico-economic priorities. Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of the world-making power of difference over the past half-millennium is the European invasion of the Americas, where Indigenous socioecological realities were deemed too radically different to be governed and thus were violently transformed, often erased, in order to render them commensurate with European norms and forms of life.

In contrast to the instrumentalisation – and consequent downgrading – of Indigenous lifeworlds by authoritarian social forces, indigeneity for Indigenous communities is not a mere social-identitary label. Rather, it represents the active reaffirmation of difference against the hegemonic production of abstract, homogenising spatial universals. Here, the particular does not simply stand in opposition to the universal; it *actualises* it, while simultaneously challenging and reshaping its very terms. Although dominant groups may weaponise indigeneity to marginalise those marked as different, indigeneity also discloses the genealogical and territorial continuities that bind Indigenous peoples to the lands progressively appropriated by colonisers and settlers (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005, p. 614). Crucially, the political force of indigeneity – its capacity to resist, endure and reassert itself – derives from the grounding of Indigenous difference *in and through* space. Indigeneity is not merely difference *in* space, but difference *about* and *because of* space. The etymological meaning of Indigenous as originary to a territory underscores that dispossession is experienced not only as material displacement but as a form of corporeal violation. Yet this spatial relationship must not be misconstrued as essentialist. It is immanent in the Hegelian sense: reason, freedom and self-actualisation emerge from within the situated practices of Indigenous subjects, not from an external metaphysical essence. Even when forcibly removed from ancestral homelands, Indigenous peoples continue to carry these places as ethical and symbolic extensions of their own bodies. At the same time, indigeneity is often misrepresented through pseudoscientific ideas of ethnic purity or essentialised identity: external discourses that obscure its relational, historical and political character and, in doing so, erode Indigenous agency (Ioris, 2019). Properly understood, indigeneity is a dynamic, spatially grounded mode of being and resisting, not an immutable biological category.

Although dominant politico-economic actors often construe indigeneity as a 'passport' to poverty, marginality and socio-spatial backwardness, Indigenous peoples themselves frequently reappropriate indigeneity as a political resource, mobilising it in struggles for recognition, territorial restoration and forms of social inclusion grounded in their own terms of difference. Yet indigeneity is not reducible to an exceptionalist stance. To be, and to feel, Indigenous also entails sharing memories and lived experiences of discrimination, dispossession and socio-spatial exclusion with other subordinated groups across the world. These resonances reflect the broader condition in which indigeneity is constituted: a relational and historically situated process through which meaning, identity and subjectivity are produced within multiscalar power relations that simultaneously affect diverse segments of the working class. Indigeneity, therefore, is not a static marker nor merely a protective

assertion of difference. It is a dynamic, self-conscious and relational practice, a response to the persistent attempts to regulate, diminish and exploit those who carry Indigenous claims. Growing up and becoming Indigenous, whether in urban peripheries or reservation contexts, entails an ongoing process of reclamation, reconnection and recovery. To be Indigenous is to affirm valued differences while resisting forces that seek to erase them. Crucially, the struggle for indigeneity is intimately linked to the struggles of proletarians, peasants and other subaltern groups; it is shaped by parallel confrontations with homogenising tendencies that impose similar relations of production and social reproduction. Consciousness of indigeneity thus involves occupying a socio-spatially distinctive position while simultaneously standing in opposition to wider forces of abstraction that undermine difference itself.

The next section examines the sustained and strategically orchestrated attack on Indigenous differences and the consequent emergence of *mis-difference* as a dominant socio-spatial condition. It then explores the intersections and mutual reinforcing dynamics between proletarian and Indigenous identities, synergies that underpin the capacity of the working class to resist and confront the socio-spatial pressures of national and global capitalism. The concluding section synthesises the principal insights of the analysis and outlines their implications for decolonising development, reclaiming Indigenous differences and advancing a genuinely decolonial politics of difference.

Mis-Difference against the Indigenous Different

If the ancestral world of what is now called 'the Americas' was, by and large, destroyed – less than 10% of the original population is estimated to have survived – its replacement emerged from the profound indifference of Europeans to both longstanding and newly perceived differences. Vast areas, spanning millions of square kilometres, were seized on the basis of the presumed superiority of whiteness and, correspondingly, the assumed worthlessness of all that was non-white (evidently, whiteness is a racialised category constructed and legitimised through the colonial process itself). As a result, the lands inhabited by thousands of Indigenous peoples were not recognised as true property within a legal system rooted in Roman jurisprudence. The maintenance of exploitation and segregation – rather than any meaningful attempt to bring people together – constituted an exercise of indifferent power in pursuit of highly differential and externally imposed economic objectives (Escobar, 2008). Contemporary problems echo this tragic past. Western economic expansion historically arrived wrapped in narratives of modernisation and religious

conversion, but in effect replicate European institutions in the newly incorporated territories, imposing oppressive colonialist laws and the familiar violence of the gun and the cross (Monteiro, 2022). Classical European colonisation was framed by the goal of replacing economic and moral categories deemed obsolete or out of place. Today, imperialism and (neo)colonialism continue as large-scale formations grounded in the instrumentalisation of difference and justified by the self-proclaimed superiority of dominant socio-political centres. Through this logic, difference becomes the means by which boundaries are drawn between the realm of widespread human diversity and an imagined field of purification constructed through power. These dynamics reinforce long-standing social asymmetries and political hegemonies, especially in relation to groups forced to bear the stigma of features deemed inferior.

The modern world has been shaped by a dual and mutually reinforcing negativity: on the one hand, *difference* functions as a mechanism for discriminating among social groups that ostensibly possess equivalent rights and prerogatives; on the other, *indifference* serves as the negation of singular ontological attributes. As a result, value production, privatisation and socio-ecological exploitation – the foundations of capitalist relations of production and reproduction – have required a systematic reorganisation of social differences. In this process, the control and manipulation of diverse forms of difference helped to sustain a precarious balance between the centrifugal pressures of economic complexification and the centripetal demands of political authority and discipline.

This turbulent metabolism of difference, which underpins the contemporary world, has always been marked by contradictions and tensions. A capitalist economy premised on the commodification of everything necessarily depends on the instrumentalisation of ethnoclass differences (alongside other forms of differentiation), yet this dependence is obscured by the pervasive operation of indifference. Today, these contradictions are readily observable: rising affluence is accompanied by escalating poverty; the more capitalism evolves, the more reliant it becomes on instrumentalised differences, all while cultivating indifference toward the conditions experienced by the majority. Not coincidentally, inequality intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic. In practice, difference has been transmuted into indifference and the distances separating groups, nations and individuals have become reified and fixed in time and space, rather than recognised as dynamic, contested and deeply politicised (Ioris, 2020, p. 400).

One of the most emblematic expressions of the interwoven economic and extra-economic bases of alienation in the contemporary world is the persistent appropriation of Indigenous land and the simultaneous conversion of both territory and displaced populations into new opportunities for capital circulation and accumulation. In practice, Indigenous differences continue to be targeted, devalued and subjected to systemic indifference, an integral component in the production of a world structured by mis-difference, where indifference itself becomes the prevailing socio-spatial norm. As Byrd (2011, p. 32) observes, the United States has long sustained a political logic originally devised to manage Indigenous lands and this logic has continued to orient much of the country's necropolitics, that is, the exercise of power over who is permitted to live and who is consigned to death.

After decades of land grabbing and violent enclosure, the resultant inequalities are staggering. Approximately 98% of all private land in the United States (some 856 million acres) is now held by descendants of white settlers who benefited from sustained government and military support in the project of 'clearing' Indigenous populations; Ted Turner alone owns more land than all Indigenous nations combined (Estes et al., 2021). Indigenous peoples were forced into a reconfigured social reality in which their markers of difference became grounds for banishment, forced assimilation and, in many cases, obliteration and death. The consolidation of settler power required the continual production of the inferiorised non-white subject, that is, deemed undervalued, subordinate and predisposed to servitude. The survivors and their descendants have had to navigate profoundly altered and often precarious socio-spatial conditions, including the ethnoclass enclaves known as 'Indigenous reservations'. These spaces, despite having their own specific histories and circumstances, are frequently surrounded by vast private plantations and are marked by acute poverty, deprivation and political neglect (Normann, 2021).

The history of North American peoples starkly illuminates a foundational paradox of modernity and coloniality: while modern power tirelessly produces local and global spaces through intertwined economic and extra-economic relations, it simultaneously erodes the vitality of the differentiated worlds it encounters. The homogenising pressures that enable capitalist modernity to function depend on the continual reification of difference, whereby human lives are alienated and subsumed into abstract value forms and standardised socio-economic practices. Such processes fracture social life into discrete, disconnected elements – what Ollman (1976, p. 130) describes as the "segmentation or practical breakdown of the interconnected elements" of reality – generating disunity, intensified individualism and the foreclosure of collective futurities. To render people and places governable, global capitalism incorporates them into a world system organised through alienated

differences. Alienation here operates not merely as dispossession but as an active demand that subaltern groups inhabit positions assigned to them by national and international politico-economic elites. For exploitation to proceed – through the extraction of surplus, territorial enclosure, or racialised labour control – those targeted must first be ideologically and practically persuaded that the instrumentalisation of their very differences is both inevitable and desirable. As Spivak reminds us, the subaltern is not intrinsically subaltern but 'subalternised': fractured economically and politically, dislocated from the continuity of their own interiority and permitted expression only insofar as they adopt the authorised idioms of Western science, development and philosophy. Her formulation of dislocation or 'translation' (Spivak 1994) captures this dynamic: a violent mediation between the lived differences that constitute the subject and the abstract, universalising vortex of global capital.

The tension between the homogenising imperatives of mainstream development and the dense, situated lifeworlds of Indigenous peoples demands analytical approaches capable of grasping more than identity or cultural distinction. It requires a framework attuned to the ways Indigenous self-conscious difference unsettles the universalising logics of capitalist modernity. As Radcliffe (2020) argues, Indigenous peoples are co-constituted within contemporary political economies: simultaneously marginalised from the rewards of globalisation and yet deeply incorporated into labour exploitation, resource extraction and racialised governance. This contradictory positioning is not incidental but structurally produced. McCormack's (2012) analysis underscores this point by situating indigeneity within ongoing struggles over land and commons. Her work shows how certain state-sanctioned forms of 'acceptable' indigeneity – exemplified in the New Zealand context – are selectively rewarded to the extent that they accommodate neoliberal reforms, reproduce settler-state authority and refrain from challenging dominant regimes of property. Such dynamics reveal indigeneity not as a fixed identity but as a contested political formation shaped through uneven geographies of capital, dispossession and recognition. The complexity of these socio-spatial trajectories raises difficult methodological questions. As Radcliffe (2020, p. 378) asks, what analytical frameworks can adequately account for the interplay of structure and agency while also recognising the 'excess' of Indigenous relations, practices and epistemologies – elements that cannot be fully absorbed into Western economic theory? Spivak's reminder that global conversation requires an engagement with "peoples with completely different systems of writing" (in Derrida, 2016, p. 360) is instructive here. It points toward the need for a decolonial analytic capable of reading Indigenous difference not as an object to be

subsumed or translated into developmental rationality, but as a mode of world-making that interrupts, repurposes and exceeds the homogenising pressures of global capital.

The systematic effort to minimise, exaggerate, or otherwise instrumentalise Indigenous differences in accordance with shifting economic and political agendas – most visibly in the agribusiness sector's ongoing attempts to legitimise past land grabbing and expand territorial incursions into reservations and contested areas – constitutes a deliberate strategy of dislocation. Rather than operating outside or against the colonial state, the violent practices of the frontier rabble functioned as one of its principal mechanisms of territorial expansion; it follows the doctrine of 'preemption' where a higher authority overrides the rights of native residents to seize and occupy the land, resulting in a dominion without consent (Wolfe, 2006). The latter author further underscores that settler colonialism operates as an all-encompassing project of land appropriation, coordinating a wide array of actors, from metropolitan centres to frontier zones, in pursuit of Indigenous subjugation and elimination. This process unfolds regardless of the presence or absence of formal state institutions, driven by a potent convergence of material greed and ideological imperatives. These manoeuvres aim to detach Indigenous peoples from the histories and geographies that ground their political claims, forcing them into the undifferentiated condition of the broader working population (Ioris, 2024a, p. 274). Within the short-term calculus of conventional development thinking, exemplified paradigmatically by South American agribusiness, indigeneity is not treated as a barrier to rent seeking, enclosure, or labour exploitation; rather, it is mobilised as a tool to manufacture false equivalences among subaltern groups and impose dominant socio-spatial relations under the guise of neutrality (Ioris, 2025).

Through these intertwined processes, Indigenous peoples become further incorporated into the expanding circuits of proletarianisation and commodification that characterise market-driven globalisation. Yet this incorporation does not produce passive subjects. A characteristic response has been the reaffirmation and strategic reworking of Indigenous differences against the hegemonic currents of differentiation. Such counter-movements involve the revitalisation of traditional knowledges, kinship systems and ritual practices, elements that constitute politically potent resources in struggles over land, voice and recognition (Ioris, 2023, p. 21). Affirming difference on their own terms enables Indigenous peoples not only to contest dominant developmental logics but also to strengthen alliances with other subaltern groups engaged in parallel forms of resistance. This highlights the need to move beyond dichotomous understandings of difference. As Andersen (2009, p. 92) argues, indigeneity cannot be reduced to an abstract identitarian marker; its

significance lies in what he describes as density, an intuitive, relational and situated condition formed through historically specific positions within modernity's uneven landscapes. Indigenous existence therefore emerges not as a cultural residue to be catalogued by Western epistemologies, but as a complex, idiosyncratic way of being that exceeds the reductive frames through which development practitioners and state authorities attempt to contain it.

Difference is not an abstract ontological axiom but a central terrain through which struggles against the erasure of social and individual lifeworlds are waged. Indigenous efforts to *be* and *remain* different must therefore be read as part of a broader, collective mobilisation against the exclusionary politico-economic forces that structure mainstream development. Paradoxically, the very features that render Indigenous peoples increasingly distinctive are also those that situate them within wider constellations of subaltern struggle. People do not enter the world as proletarians or peasants; they become so through the historically and geographically situated operations of capitalism. Likewise, indigeneity is not an innate, pre-social marker but a political and relational condition that takes form through encounters, often violent, with explorers, settlers, bureaucrats and state institutions. To be or not to be Indigenous is thus not a matter of cultural essence but a question of rights, survival and ongoing political reinterpretation. This underscores the importance of an anti-essentialist critique, particularly given the polyvalent and historically contingent character of both indigenous and indigeneity. Far from being given in advance, indigeneity emerges from collective struggles to defend and reassert modes of life that capitalist development seeks to neutralise. Crucially, these struggles cannot be separated from the class-based mobilisations of proletarian and peasant groups who do not identify as Indigenous but confront similar forms of dispossession and commodification. As Byrd (2011, p. 32) argues, indigeneity operates as a form of *radical alterity*, a counterpoint that disrupts the settler fictions of multicultural inclusion and diasporic arrival. It is simultaneously temporal and spatial, structural and structuring. While Indigenous peoples are not necessarily proletarian or peasant, the political resonances between these positions become evident in collective refusals of capitalist imperatives: rejecting the commodification of labour, land and ecological relations; resisting enclosure; and asserting non-capitalist value practices. The *not-to-be* capitalist of peasants and proletarians thus converges with the *be-more-Indigenous* of Indigenous groups, generating shared, if uneven, political horizons of struggle.

Difference, Labour and Indigeneity

Contemporary politico-spatial dynamics make clear that instrumentalised differences remain central to the reproduction of capitalist power. They operate as mechanisms for sorting, disciplining and extracting value from those rendered second-rate, even as they sustain the very systems of labour and consumption on which accumulation depends. Political equality and economic evenness are fundamentally incompatible with the prevailing economic order, an order intensified in the current conjuncture of mass consumerism, hyper-rentism and the socio-political turbulence that crystallised around the 2008 crisis and its aftermath. Elite accumulation has flourished through ever-deeper rent extraction, privatisation and ideological manoeuvres that weaponise spurious claims about difference to legitimise inequality. These socio-spatial tensions are consistently masked by narratives of economic success, individual liberty and consumer choice, even though the benefits of growth are captured by a narrow stratum of privilege. In practice, the only 'freedom' widely available is participation in profoundly asymmetric spatial relations that reproduce exploitation. As Braudel reminds us, capitalism has always depended on the ancillary labour of subordinated others and on the systematic suppression of broader economic liberties; its monopolistic tendencies form the connective tissue between state power and class privilege.

Modern capitalism's paradox is therefore straightforward: it denies meaningful difference in order to profit from an illusory, tightly policed sense of freedom. Hegel's account of 'absolute freedom' exposes the contradictions at the heart of this project. Freedom, when institutionalised as an abstract universal administered by the state, is imposed through forms of coercion that suppress singularity; yet within this imposed universality lies negation, difference as the immanent force that disrupts the homogenising claims of the universal. Difference and non-identity persist as the internal limit of capitalist abstraction. What appears as the seamless extension of freedom under liberal law is thus always shadowed by the very differences it attempts to contain, regulate, or erase. In this sense, the management of difference is not a peripheral matter but a foundational contradiction through which modern capitalist rule is both consolidated and continually unsettled. It was pointed out by Hegel that the 'absolute freedom' of modern societies (as the realm of an abstract universal will and claims of equality under a liberal law) is certainly imposed by the state via terror, that systematically oppresses the individual, but at the same time also harbours its contradiction in the form of difference and in the force of autonomous differentiation: "Absolute freedom as *pure* self-identity of the universal will thus has within it *negation*; but this means that it contains *difference* in general; and this again it develops as an *actual* difference" (Hegel, 1977, p. 361). Hegel insists here that

difference is connected to but also a negation of the universal, as identity and non-identity come together.

Capitalist relations structured around difference are never relations of equality or equivalence; they depend on the continual magnification of historical and spatial unevenness as a condition for consolidating regimes of production, commercialisation and accumulation. The intensified dominance of exchange value in late modernity, coupled with the deepening reach of market-centred interactions, has only sharpened this uneven terrain. One of the most violent manifestations of this dynamic is the systematic instrumentalisation of Indigenous difference through indifference – a process that produces what may be called mis-difference: the distortion, erasure and repurposing of difference to sustain a deeply hierarchical social order. This logic is starkly evident in the long history of transforming Indigenous nations into abstracted, generic populations – peoples rendered permanently displaceable, exploitable and, at times, eliminable. The colonial pressures of dispossession, racialised violence, and the civilisational tropes of God, Crown and capital continue to reverberate more than five centuries after Europeans first crossed the Atlantic. For Indigenous peoples to be dispossessed, exploited, or destroyed, they must first be recast as the other of Western European societies, stripped of autonomous socio-spatial control and denied recognition as agents capable of sustaining their own differentiated forms of life. From the standpoint of power, the Indigenous subject is allotted only an instrumentalised, passive position; authorised to exist, if at all, through externally imposed and bureaucratically mediated categories of identification. Instead of being recognised as holders of their own socio-spatial institutions, Indigenous peoples are routinely subsumed into the abstract figure of the undifferentiated working class, a move that flattens their histories, ontologies and political claims. Thus, entire ancestral nations become gathered under the homogenising label of 'Indians', a term that erases rather than describes. Their humanity itself has often been questioned, pathologised through depictions of lifestyles deemed aberrant, excessive, or incompatible with the settler project.

Following the perverse instrumentalisation of difference, Indigenous nations have been repeatedly targeted precisely because of their socio-spatial distinctiveness, differences that dominant politico-economic forces then devalue, caricature and render governable. From the vantage point of capital and the state, Indigenous ways of living stand in stark contrast to globalised regimes of production and consumption; consequently, Indigenous presence is tolerated only through reductive stereotypes that portray them as passive subjects, fused with the ecosystems they inhabit and

therefore available for extraction, enclosure, or elimination. However, this dynamic is anything but linear. It is profoundly dialectical. Indigenous peoples are compelled, often violently, to adopt attributes of the dominant society, while simultaneously mobilising key elements of indigeneity as strategic resources for resisting incorporation and dispossession (Ioris, 2022). These tensions are increasingly visible in contemporary grassroots struggles, where labour mobilisation, peasant organising and ethnicity-based interventions often converge in shared terrains of resistance. A vibrant Indigenous scholarship and expanding forms of public advocacy continue to expose the heterogeneity of Indigenous experiences and the complex forms of politico-spatial agency that emerge from them. This work underscores a deep awareness of the afterlives of colonialism, the contradictions of contemporary capitalism and the inventive ways Indigenous communities sustain collective life and political presence through their lived differences (Harris, 2002). Importantly, these differences matter not only because they ground legitimate political claims but because they confront the anti-difference logic that undergirds dominant relations of production. Such mobilisations seek to disrupt the hegemonic whiteness that structures property regimes and political power, regimes that have long rendered Indigenous peoples invisible within national histories and social imaginaries (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). As Western modernity continues to encroach upon Indigenous territories and livelihoods, many Indigenous communities are pushed into the ranks of peasants and proletarians. This proletarianisation is never a simple process of loss or assimilation; it also opens space for Indigenous groups to reconfigure and 'indigenise' the working class, bringing alternative value practices, political repertoires and relational ontologies into broader struggles against capitalist domination.

This complex dialectic of shared differences exposes the limitations of approaches that fixate on the precariousness of Indigenous life, as if uncertainty, instability and vulnerability were defining ontological attributes. Such framings ultimately reinforce the dominant logic of abstraction and instrumentalisation. Under the guise of inclusive or 'mindful' analysis, many authors continue to reproduce a speculative binary imaginary of omnipotent conquerors and utterly dispossessed 'Indians' (Chandler and Reid, 2020), thereby flattening the socio-spatial heterogeneity and political agency of Indigenous worlds. Against this reductive cartography, which treats space as a static backdrop rather than a contested field of struggle, Indigenous agency becomes indispensable for rethinking the scope and purpose of geographical inquiry. The relationship between Indigenous socio-spatial practices and colonial structures is not merely empirical but deeply ontological, a relation best apprehended through a dialectical lens. Hegel's insights, expanded by Marx in his critique of bourgeois individualism, underscore that individuality attains its fullest realisation

only through social life and that no genuine freedom is possible without a free, rational society. In this neo-Hegelian sense, Indigenous peoples function as the particulars that actualise the concrete universal: their situated practices, refusals and modes of being illuminate the contradictions within capitalist modernity. Contrary to the modernist faith in linear progress, technological mastery and the sovereignty of the abstract individual, subjectivity exists only through relationality. Individuals emerge through their bonds with others and groups constitute themselves through negation of external forces that seek to define or diminish them. As Hegel writes, the single individual "is true only as a universal multiplicity of single individuals" (1977, p. 292). Such a formulation resonates with Indigenous collectivities whose survival and resistance reaffirm that difference is not a deficit to be corrected but a generative condition that unsettles the universalising claims of capitalist and colonial power.

Maybe even more striking is the way Indigenous interrogations of European preconceptions unsettle not only positivist science and its attendant injustices, but also the philosophical architectures of Western thought itself, including Hegel's vision of the absolute and Marx's communist project. Just as Marx located in the proletariat the 'particular' that reveals and subverts the contradictions of Hegel's system, Indigenous peoples constitute a differentiated, situated segment of the proletariat whose trajectories of incorporation into capitalism profoundly challenge its universalising pretensions. Their position is neither external to nor fully contained within the capitalist totality: it is a structurally produced location that exposes the limits of both bourgeois ideology and orthodox class analysis. In this sense, indigeneity and class-condition do not merely intersect, they continually reshape and potentiate one another. The more forcibly Indigenous communities are proletarianised, the more clearly their Indigenous political subjectivity is asserted; conversely, where proletarianisation is resisted or deferred, indigeneity is rendered vulnerable to co-optation, erasure, or domestication. This contradictory dynamic exemplifies a dialectic at the heart of colonial capitalism: subordination generates the very forms of negation that unsettle its authority. Indigenous communities have repeatedly enacted some of the most radical forms of negation – what might be read as an Indigenous appropriation of *the negation of the negation* – transforming both the conditions imposed upon them and their own political possibilities. Their struggles unsettle authoritarian forms of spatial ordering while producing new identities that are simultaneously *more Indigenous* and *more proletarian*. This dialectically charged interplay between individuals, collectivities and imposed structures is central to the production and contestation of space. The alienation of Indigenous populations is not an abstract philosophical condition, but a socio-spatial process imposed through settlement, enclosure and the systematic disqualification of

originary nations. Claims by non-Indigenous groups to Indigenous territories – often articulated as civilisational entitlements or developmental necessities – exemplify the racialised logics of capitalist improvement, where the presence of white settlers is framed as the precondition for progress. Such claims reveal the racist underpinnings of development discourse and the spatial violence required to fabricate the appearance of a coherent, modern order.

Mounting levels of anti-Indigenous violence are not, however, the final act of mainstream development. Rather, they index the ongoing effort to consolidate a socio-spatial order premised on the elimination or containment of difference. Indigeneity, therefore, cannot be understood simply as a reactive stance against the abstract homogeneity of capitalism; it also functions as an internal limit to capitalist universality, a point of friction that exposes its contradictions and interrupts its smooth reproduction. What challenges the spurious coherence of capitalist abstraction is not an essentialised Indigenous subject, but the Notion of indigeneity in the Hegelian sense, that is, a historically grounded and socially embodied form of collective becoming that refuses to be subsumed into mis-difference and the disciplining imperatives of capitalist hegemony. Indigeneity also performs a crucial supplementary role in class struggle. The conflicts between Indigenous peoples and their adversaries are inseparable from renewed cycles of primitive accumulation and proletarianisation that simultaneously shape the trajectories of non-Indigenous peasants and urban workers. It is in this overlapping terrain that indigeneity reveals its political force: not as an identitarian endpoint, but as a generative opening for alliances, solidarities and at times rivalries within the wider working class. Numerous Indigenous intellectuals, including Deloria Jr., Moreton-Robinson, Andersen, Krenak, Raoni and Kopenawa, have emphasised the density and specificity of Indigenous being as part of a broader struggle for recognition, participation and material redress.

For instance, Kopenawa (2013, p. 163-164) insists that all people share the same ontological condition and, for that reason, should be able to resolve their differences; *Omama*, the central creator deity and cultural hero in Yanomami mythology, "created us, but it was also him who brought the white people into existence. There is only one and the same sky above us. There is only one sun, one moon. We live on the same earth. The white people were not created by their governments." Krenak (2019) traces the accelerating dynamics of socio-ecological and cultural degradation that are propelling the world toward systemic catastrophe. At the same time, it issues a collective call to seek out and cultivate alternatives, foregrounding the urgency of learning from those who have already endured and understood the 'end of the world', that is, particular attention should be given to the knowledge systems of Indigenous

nations, whose historical and ongoing experiences of dispossession, rupture, and survival offer not only testimony, but critical insight into pathways beyond collapse. In a special talk in London in 2021, Krenak argued that the "Earth is a canoe that can carry all, animals, plants, humans. Manoeuvring the canoe requires everyone there to settle down, carefully, so that it can flow over the water. Life is a celebration, every day is an extraordinary surprise (in Ioris, 2024b, p. 10).

The ontological density that permeates the argument of Indigenous scholars is not an inward-looking cultural residue but a relational condition that unsettles attempts to negate the interdependency between societies and reduce indigeneity to a fixed, apolitical identity. Nonetheless, through indigeneity, the wider working class can more readily apprehend what Hegel identifies as the fluidity of the individual, an entity without rigid essence, prone to self-forgetting and constituted through the movement between identity and difference. As Malabou (2004, p. 32) argues, the subject persists "as a unity of identity and difference," a formulation that foregrounds the plastic, ever-changing dimensions of proletarian life. The ontology of the proletarian subject is thus multifaceted, shaped by both the loss of fluidity imposed by coercive structures and the persistent impulses toward autonomy and self-determination. Neither moment is ever complete: sublation remains partial, leaving traces of prior forms intact within emergent ones. The consequence is a broad, heterogeneous working class equipped with diverse repertoires of resistance, tools forged through entangled histories of dispossession, exploitation and refusal. Within this expanding field of struggle, indigeneity contributes not a romanticised essence but a differentiated political consciousness that strengthens efforts to confront and overturn the exclusions and oppressions structuring contemporary capitalist development.

There is nothing particularly unexpected in this dynamic, given that working-class differences are themselves relational formations and expressions of multiple, unevenly distributed positions of degradation, exploitation and spatial marginalisation. Working-class groups, which necessarily include Indigenous peoples, are forged through a negative dialectic produced by the imposition of power and the perpetual struggle to subvert it. This is the terrain on which subjects attempt to become more fully what they already are and what they imagine themselves capable of becoming. As McGowan argues, "freedom is unimaginable without negation"; it is the capacity to negate the givens of one's existence – biological, cultural, institutional – that forms the basis of subjective freedom (McGowan, 2019, p. 154). Derogatory treatments of ethnicity and class identity – despite their distinct ontological and politico-spatial

genealogies – are intimately entangled. Their subordination is synergistic because both are positioned in relation to those who have asserted superiority and privilege through juridical, racialised and property-based regimes that protect their own ethnoclass prerogatives. This association plays both a revelatory and anticipatory role: to be proletarian and to be Indigenous converge in forging a shared consciousness of struggle, one directed against dispossession, erasure and the ongoing refusal of recognition by dominant classes and institutions. Rejecting oppressive modernity is therefore not a nostalgic retreat into what has been lost, but a leap toward futures shaped through the assertion of differences on their own terms. The revival and rearticulation of difference become essential to producing more inclusive socio-spatial worlds for the majority of the global population: proletarians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike. Hegel anticipated this when describing the externalisation of the individual as the moment in which self-consciousness becomes entangled with the world: a process that results not only in the formation of the self, but in "the development of actual world" (Hegel, 1977, p. 299). The affirmation of the particular, then, cannot be disentangled from the world of multiple, intersecting relations that constitute it. Particular differences are reinserted into the universal, not as subsumed identities but as constitutive moments that reveal the universal as nothing more than the sedimentation of many differentiated singularities. The universal emerges not by erasing these differences, but through their ongoing, conflictual interaction.

Indigeneity operates simultaneously as a principle and a practice through which multiple political contestations converge to remake socio-spatial orders in ways that benefit both Indigenous and non-Indigenous segments of the working majority. As Durán Matute (2021) argues, indigeneity is not a stable descriptor but a battlefield: a category that can unify or fracture subaltern groups depending on whether it is imposed, co-opted, or asserted autonomously. Rather than a fixed identity, indigeneity is better understood as an open-ended historical process, contingent, relational and continually shaped by the sedimented legacies of colonial intrusion and Indigenous world-making. The denial of Indigenous difference on its own terms is, at its core, a denial of Indigenous worlds: their value systems, relational orders and modes of inhabiting land. It is precisely these worlds that offer fertile ground for alliances with other subaltern groups and thus these worlds that dominant institutions seek to suppress. Containment requires spatial marginalisation. Indigenous people must be kept at the edges of society, confined to impoverished reservations, precarious occupations of territory, or urban peripheries where their entanglements with the broader working class occur primarily through shared experiences of exploitation, dispossession and exclusion. Within agribusiness-driven political economies, for instance, socio-spatial segregation produces the figure of the

'Indian made even more Indian', a racialised caricature produced by enemies of Indigenous life. Here indigeneity is stripped of political agency and simultaneously barred from its material basis: the land from which Indigenous claims are grounded. Byrd's (2011) formulation of 'degenerate indigeneity' captures this dynamic. Indigeneity becomes a form of transit, a classificatory movement that imperial power deploys both domestically and abroad. It links the violence enacted against Indigenous nations within U.S. borders to the violence exported globally through military aggression, geopolitical discipline and the continual recoding of colonised peoples as 'Indians'. Through this recursive logic, indigeneity becomes the political shorthand through which empire reproduces its racialised geographies of dispossession.

The Indigenous subject is, in this context, not simply another among all the others, but a figure produced through the asymmetries that organise the wider proletarian condition. While Indigenous demands often converge with those of other working-class groups, they also carry a distinct supplement of difference, an excess that both differentiates and connects Indigenous struggles to broader terrains of class antagonism. As de la Cadena and Starn (2020) insist, indigeneity is irreducibly relational: it emerges within fields structured by rivalry, domination and unequal capacities to define who is rendered Indigenous and who is authorised to speak from elsewhere. Its meaning is forged through a dialectic of negation – what we are not, what is not us – while simultaneously constituting a refusal to be subordinated within the hierarchies that colonial and capitalist power naturalise. Indigeneity thus materialises only within wider social fields of difference and sameness, as de la Cadena and Starn (2007, p. 4) argue, where its force derives from challenging the practices of power, discourse and spatial imagination that entrench racialised hierarchies under the guise of neutrality. Alfred and Corntassel's (2005, p. 597) insistence that indigeneity is "constructed, shaped, and lived in the politicised context of contemporary colonialism" underscores this point: Indigenous identity is not a residual cultural essence but a politically charged formation forged through ongoing contestation. Much like indigeneity, class itself is not a static identity but a positionality constituted through contradiction, antagonism and the uneven geographies of capitalist accumulation. Ethnic and ethno-national differences, often mobilised to justify new hierarchies or to replace one oppressive order with another, operate within the same structural field. For this reason, the Indigenous proletarian occupies a pivotal position in struggles against mis-difference, the systematic distortion and weaponisation of difference that underpins capitalist and colonial domination. The more Indigenous and the more proletarian they become, the more

their identity reveals its double movement: intensified differentiation coupled with an expanded universality. Their struggles articulate both the specificity of Indigenous world-making and the shared horizons of the wider working class confronting dispossession, exploitation and the violence of imposed sameness.

Conclusion: Difference and Decolonisation

The key point emerging from the preceding discussion is that the socio-spatial specificities of each Indigenous people must be understood not only in their singularity but also in relation to the shared trajectories of other Indigenous and non-Indigenous segments of the working majority, particularly in terms of their agency, resistance and modes of mobilisation. This has direct implications for both academic practice and transformative political work. Indigenous peoples cannot remain positioned as exoticised objects of study; rather, their lived conditions and ways of knowing demand critical reinterpretation, including a reassessment of how knowledge about indigeneity is produced, circulated and authorised by Indigenous and non-Indigenous actors alike. Following Hegel, new knowledge must be generated through the phenomenological movement of consciousness, through its embeddedness in contradictory social relations that unfold across and through difference. Such a perspective resonates with Saldaña-Portillo's emphasis on the hegemonic genealogies of racial difference, which remind us that the conceptual terrain on which indigeneity is studied is itself structured by histories of domination. Indeed, the more indigeneity is forced into pre-fabricated theoretical schemas about identity and difference, the less analytically useful and politically meaningful it becomes for addressing the actual demands and struggles of Indigenous peoples (Saldaña-Portillo, 2016). Moreton-Robinson (2015) is particularly incisive on this point. She argues that patriarchal white nation-states – and the universities embedded within them – actively produce cultural difference as a technique of governance, ensuring that Indigenous claims remain legible only in forms compatible with white possessive logics. Knowledge production about cultural specificity thus becomes complicit with state objectives by rendering difference manageable and racially configured through whiteness. What is routinely missed in these accounts is that difference is not a static attribute but an incremental process of self-consciousness, one that exceeds fragmented conceptualisations of identity and connects Indigenous experience to broader ethnoclass struggles. This process unfolds across multiple scales. Ethnoclass identification is never purely cultural but evolves through familial relations, community solidarities and alliances that extend into wider Indigenous and non-Indigenous collectivities. The experiences of Indigenous peoples across the world

underscore the foundational importance of the family nucleus, as well as the political significance of inter-family coalitions and grassroots forms of collective action. These dynamics belie interpretations that reduce Indigenous difference to a form of local 'anarcho-indigeneity'. Rather, strong group identification necessarily incorporates a class dimension, one that aligns Indigenous struggles with the trajectories of other subordinated groups that constitute the national and global working class.

Stavenhagen's (1975) intervention remains significant precisely because it exposes the analytical futility of rigidly separating Indigenous peoples from the peasantry in Latin America. Both groups have long been incorporated into the same socio-economic systems, subjected to comparable trajectories of dispossession, displacement and state-sanctioned violence. In much of the region's agrarian landscape, vast portions of the population occupy structurally antagonistic positions vis-à-vis national elites and the neo-colonial interests that reproduce underdevelopment, interests sustained through dependence on foreign capital, technology transfers and severely uneven terms of trade. The result is a stratified regime that consistently excludes and exploits groups labelled Indigenous or peasant, extending the subordinate position of national agrarian élites in the global economy to the degradation of Indigenous and mestizo populations within domestic hierarchies. Stavenhagen further argues that social relations are fundamentally structured through class antagonisms, which encompass whole societies and shape their formation. Yet the limitation of this analysis lies in its reduction of other axes of domination – race, caste, gender – to subordinate effects of property relations and production, capturing his defence of ethnodevelopment within a narrow teleology of economic growth. Mackinnon (1987) similarly insists that gender and ethnic injustices cannot be resolved through piecemeal reforms; they require transformations in the wider balance of power. Modern societies are not organised exclusively through class antagonisms, but through relations of reproduction, community, household labour and non-economic forms of social ordering that intersect unevenly with class processes. These insights foreground a central challenge for radical politics: class struggle is inseparable from ethnic, spatial and gendered forms of difference, yet unifying heterogeneous demands remains difficult. As Taylor (1997, p. 234) observes, "the politics of difference grows organically out of the politics of universal dignity," suggesting that any ethnoclass project must articulate difference with broader claims to justice and equality. What is needed, therefore, is a political space capable of recognising interconnected differences and attuning them to the specific social and spatial realities in which they emerge, a space where Indigenous and non-Indigenous struggles can converge without erasing their distinct genealogies of dispossession and resistance.

The difficulty of situating ethnic objectives within broader class struggle continues to pose a structural dilemma for many Indigenous and non-Indigenous ethnoclass minorities. For non-Indigenous people surviving under conditions of acute poverty, the pressures of everyday life often compel them to relinquish claims to cultural distinction and instead position themselves as undifferentiated members of the working class (Ioris, 2021). At the same time, Indigenous nations are frequently imagined – through a vaguely essentialist gaze – as bearers of some intrinsic value, whether coded as knowledge, resilience, or spiritual depth. Such reductionist imaginaries obscure the political labour Indigenous peoples undertake to endure and resist unspeakable forms of hardship, while reinforcing an ambivalent discourse of indigeneity oscillating between loss and latent treasure, between something presumed to be disappearing and something framed as an ever-present cultural remainder. Viewed from the perspective of the badly informed non-Indigenous observer, Indigenous life becomes trapped within this ambivalent binary. Still, the everyday realities of Indigenous peoples exceed these caricatures. They may be incorporated as cheap labourers with precarious rights and limited autonomy, but they also mobilise translocal solidarities, digital networks and alliances that allow them to contest exploitation and advance their demands in unexpected ways. This dual positioning reveals a distinctive ethnoclass formation: the Indigenous individual is simultaneously a proletarian or peasant navigating the harsh conditions of capitalist accumulation and a carrier of historically sedimented ethnic-political claims that shape their forms of action and belonging. What becomes clear is that Indigenous peoples are not simply victims of exploitation – though their exploitation is severe and structurally produced – but political actors capable of transforming indigeneity into a resource of struggle. Their mobilisation of difference operates as a challenge to dominant developmental and racialised hierarchies, forging ethnoclass synergies that unsettle the categorical separation between identity and class. In these moments, indigeneity becomes neither a fixed cultural attribute nor a romanticised residue, but a relational and insurgent practice that reworks the terrain of class struggle itself.

Socio-spatial differences constitute a central terrain through which relations of power are produced, contested and transformed. They are not residual attributes of social life but active mediators that spark confrontations, generate new political possibilities and expose the violence of imposed equivalences. Across recent centuries – marked by the ascendancy of Western epistemologies and their universalising ambitions – conflicting rationalisations of difference have collided, revealing the extent to which dominant groups rely on arrogant, exclusionary frameworks to naturalise hierarchy. What presents itself as neutrality or universality is more accurately a conservative defence of the status quo: a refusal to recognise autonomous forms of difference and a justification for entrenched regimes of inequality. Mainstream ideologues celebrate

'equality before the law' even as the same juridical apparatus protects illegitimate economic privilege and the limitless accumulation of capital. The incessant *va-et-vient* between what is marked as different and what is rendered the same functions as a technique of governance, stabilising commodity production and reinforcing political control. Relations of production and reproduction are thus inseparable from mis-difference – the systematic distortion, containment, or erasure of difference in the service of capitalist order. Inequalities expand not despite claims to fairness, but because those claims mask the social violence required to maintain them. Mounting levels of exploitation and deprivation depend on eroding the politicised, self-conscious grounds of difference that enable collective resistance. The lived experiences and knowledges of those negatively positioned by dominant classifications are routinely dismissed in the name of economic 'results' that overwhelmingly benefit those already insulated by privilege. Empty invocations of equality become instruments for denying the legitimacy of dissent. If anything follows from this, it is that socio-spatial differences and the commonalities forged through struggle must be continually reasserted and renegotiated. Only through such active confrontation can the perverse consequences of capitalism's instrumentalisation of difference be challenged and reversed. The task is not to dissolve difference into an abstract universal, but to cultivate forms of relationality capable of sustaining more inclusive, democratic and insurgent socio-spatial futures.

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