Editorial

Indigenous Peoples and Their Present Needs

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The present Special Issue of *Interchange* is long overdue. It is the work of Bharath Sriraman and his collaborators and represents a number of important indigenous groups and their present needs including such things as a viable mathematical curriculum in their own language or even the right to a more or less complete modern education in their own tongue. However, some indigenous peoples who are not represented here are, we hope, symbolized by those who are.

For example, the people of Tibet, who are at least as indigenous to the area in which they live as the Han Chinese are to any other part of China, are not represented in this collection. It is, of course, the claim of the Chinese government at the present time that in fact the Tibetans were “liberated” by the Chinese Red Army in 1949 or thereabouts. For, according to the official line, the Tibetans were living under a terrible religious dictatorship which happily they have now been freed from. As it has often been noticed that governments influenced by Marxism often function like a religious dictatorship one may wonder if the Tibetan peoples merely had to trade one form of religious dictatorship for another. But there was, of course, one difference: the first one was their own.

As Sriraman notices the United Nations notion of “first inhabitants,” as a working definition of indigenous peoples, has its limitations. For example, it is not clear in many instances just who were the first inhabitants of a place. It would appear, for example, that the first inhabitants of Greenland were Vikings from Norway, not the Inuit related peoples who are there along with the Danes at the present time. Similarly the Inuit peoples of northern Canada appear to have driven out the earlier indigenous peoples when they migrated, most likely from Northern Russia, a few thousand years ago. And as Sriraman also notices, many native peoples still occupy their original lands and tolerate late comers with little fuss. For example, there is evidence that the Swedish people are continuous inhabitants of both Sweden and Finland for at least three thousand years and perhaps as much a ten

thousand years. Yet one is inclined to think of the Sámi and perhaps the Finns as indigenous peoples in that part of the world. To some degree this is perhaps due to the fact that the Swedes are anything but a people clinging to their traditional way of life or even glorifying it.

There is an element of condescension in the United Nations definition of indigenous peoples with the assumption that they need help somehow in either maintaining their way of life or in moving to something more modern, though, of course, this assumption often has grounds. While there is little doubt that the Swedes, the Norwegians, and the Danes are indigenous peoples in the meaning of the United Nations definition, they are also the most modern of peoples and the most successful in coping with the modern world that followed upon the Iron Age and the industrial revolution. To not have included them in this special issue is perhaps an oversight. But as they are as complicated as any peoples on earth, with as complicated a literature and art, scientific achievement and technological sophistication as they come, they would look out of place in a volume devoted to the present needs of some indigenous peoples.

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