

– Introduction –

RESEARCH AND ACTIVISM IN, ON, AND BEYOND A CAPITALIST WORLD SYSTEM



In January 2003, a large group of landless people gathered in an area of depleted forestland, the Muthanga Wildlife Sanctuary, in one of the hilly northern districts of Kerala, and started settling there. Most of them had taken everything they owned with them, but that just meant a few pots to cook in and some plastic bags with clothes and memorabilia. They were planning to claim a piece of land to call their own at Muthanga, for despite many government promises that agricultural workers were to own at least the plot of land their homes stood on, this had never materialized for them. At this event, their claims were not, however, phrased in terms of their poverty or the government's broken promises to agricultural workers: they were presented in the language of indigenous, or *Adivasi*, rights, the aim being to reclaim the land and lifestyle of their ancestors. The Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS), the movement leading the land occupation, did not give out statements about the need for these people to become emancipated, full citizens of Kerala—even less so about the need for them to be uplifted into the mainstream of society. Their statements were about autonomy and cultural pride. One and a half months later, however, the occupiers were evicted from the area by a massive police force that left little intact of the new life participants had hoped for.

When I first arrived in Kerala in August of 2003, it was not only the participants in the occupation who were still deeply impressed by the events: the whole of politically active Kerala (which is almost to say the whole of Kerala) was still debating the issues it had raised. Was Kerala, a society that prided itself on being progressive, that had seen

the most radical land reforms in the whole of India, where everyone had the chance to a decent wage, education, and healthcare, losing out to globalization? Was it corrupted and no longer supportive of general well-being? Or had its model of development never been supportive of this group of people, of Adivasis? Was identity politics then the way forward—was it a good thing? Was it dangerous?

I became interested in this debate and how it could shed light on the more general question of why, in the last decades of the twentieth century in many regions of the world, people who earlier struggled for emancipation, social integration, and even socialism turned to more culturally and autonomy-oriented indigenist politics. I wanted to understand, in other words, how peasants and workers had become indigenous people. This question has attracted attention in Latin America—certainly in areas where there is a strong continuity between socialist and indigenous organizing—but less so in India. By studying how and why the shift happened in Kerala, a state once known as one of the greatest success stories of democratic socialism in the world, I want to sharpen our understanding of the mechanisms producing the global rise of indigenism. I hence situate my research on the new indigenist movement that arose in Kerala in the course of the 1990s in the capitalist world system, and try to see what the social processes unfolding in Kerala indicate about this global complex of relations. And I do so in light of the urgency of transcending the capitalist world system. I seek to recognize sources of praxis that may do more than create bastions of socialism in the peripheries of global capitalism. I also, however, want to take praxis beyond the image of “500 years of indigenous resistance” as islands of hope representing people who have somehow refused to become part of the world’s proletariat and now are miraculously going to push back the power of centuries of accumulated capital. If anything, it is in the synthesis of indigenist and socialist thinking and action that I see a space of hope, and it is therefore precisely at this intersection that I have undertaken my research in, on, and beyond the capitalist world system.

My aims in this book are threefold. First, to break the reifying boundaries between people supposedly “in” and people supposedly “outside” the capitalist world system and, worse, the mapping of this division onto culturally or regionally holistic divides. Chapter 1 and 2 of this book are dedicated to deconstructing such reifying categorizations, which have historically stood in the way of more relational, contextual, and historical readings of how people come to be known as indigenous or not. Secondly, rather than speak of “indigenous resurgence,” where indigenous people who were previously struggling

for their emancipation as peasants or workers instead turn to their indigeneity for inspiration, my aim is to be clear that the rise of indigenism is a formal rather than a substantive phenomenon and that what hence needs explanation is not why indigenous people rebel but why they have started doing so under an indigenist political program. In chapters 3 to 6, I answer precisely this question. My final aim is to consider what all this can mean for praxis—for the possibility of human intervention in the capitalist logic we seem locked in that creates islands of wealth among cyclically returning wide-scale violence, dispossession, and hunger. After having tried to read history against the grain and come up with a more realistic interpretation of the world-historical processes that have led to the rise of indigenism, I hence return in chapter 7 to indigenism as a social movement, to ask how it may contribute to a different world system. These three aims emerge from my engagement with Marxian theory and methodology, which this chapter will briefly elaborate on.

Marxian Anthropology and Indigenous Studies

I work loosely within a Marxist intellectual tradition and this leads to certain emphases. Foremost among those is taking seriously class—that power-laden and historically determined social relationship of humans to each other—as a major driving force behind the totality of relations in the world system. The analytical emphasis on class is not the same as some popular understandings of class analysis as postulating that history, culture, gender, race, the state, nations or the family—to name but a few key sites of the reproduction and accumulation of relations of power—do not matter. The latter are all key mechanisms through which class relations are produced and reproduced and without which contemporary capitalism would not function. The prediction by some Marxists that in capitalism eventually such super-structural phenomena would melt into thin air as a proletariat and a bourgeoisie polarize into pure forms has been amply refuted. Class struggle in and beyond a capitalist world system has to take place along shifting historical axes of inequality of gender, race, or nation and in confrontation with the various key institutions that deepen a capitalist logic. As simultaneous development and underdevelopment represents the dynamism of capitalism, capitalist colonialism is moreover another crucial axis of class struggle (Krishna 2009). Class struggle need not—perhaps cannot—ever take place in pure form. What a Marxist perspective does is relate various histori-

cally developed social forms to class relations to thereby understand the role they play in the larger anticapitalist struggle. One such social form, to which I turn now, is the notion of indigeneity.

The Clay-like Qualities of Indigeneity

“Would it not make more sense to try to understand peoplehood for what it is—in no sense a primordial stable social reality, but a complex, clay-like historical product of the capitalist world-economy through which the antagonistic forces struggle with each other” (Wallerstein 1987: 387).

Before we can ask what explains the rise of indigenism, we need to ask what “indigeneity” stands for: how it can be understood in historical context as a particular sociological phenomenon rather than as a given, primordial reality. For if we understand indigenous peoplehood as primordial and stable, we need not wonder at all why so many people today revolt against threats to their livelihood as indigenous people since that would be the only possible basis for them to do so. If, however, we see indigeneity as expressive—in various, contested ways—of a particular historical relationship, we can understand it does not simply, once and for all, map onto substantive categories of people or particular coherent geographical regions. If we moreover acknowledge how under particular circumstances it can also become the key site of resistance against the same historical processes that formed indigeneity into an axis of dispossession, it becomes all the more clear that in this capacity it is a political project rather than simply the name of a given group of people.

It is not always easy to retain a dialectical notion of indigeneity as, in Wallerstein’s words, a “clay-like historical product.” Despite the emphasis many scholars put on relational analysis, this often becomes a dialogical analysis of the relationship between different categories rather than a dialectical analysis of the meaning of categories through a focus on what their relationship to each other in wider historical context is. Pierre Clastres (1977: 185–86) for instance claims that if “the history of peoples who have a history is the history of class struggle, [i]t might be said, with at least as much truthfulness, that the history of peoples without history is a history of their struggle against the state”. This elegantly juxtaposes the meaning of the categories of the working class and indigenous people but only by suggesting a misleadingly binary image of the role of class struggle and the state in the actual joint historical formation of each category.

In the history of the capitalist world system, indigenism has come to stand for the struggle on behalf of an original society to confront its subordination to this system. We should not ignore, however, that by the time this original society is constituted as such—as an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983)—it is already an integral part of the capitalist world system.

Indigenous people sometimes maintain distinct ways of life, some of which lean more towards a kin-based mode of production, but almost everywhere today the surpluses of this production are siphoned off as accumulated global capital that in return gains ever greater leverage over these (and other) people’s lives. Many people struggling in the name of indigenism are even more obviously part of global capitalism as they do not own any means of sustaining themselves except their own body and are fully dependent on selling their labor power as agricultural laborers, construction workers, mine workers, etc. Many of those who hold dear an indigenous way of life spend their productive lives working under direct supervision from managers of capital, subjected to dealing with whatever more “efficient” production process these come up with. Other people considered indigenous meanwhile suffer from not having their labor power appropriated by global capital and finding themselves disemployed—first having been violently made dependent on being employed, only to then be turned into a reserve army of labor. Since this is a much more widespread reality for people identifying as indigenous than self-sufficient slash-and-burn agriculture in isolated forests is, it makes sense to see indigeneity not as a relational position that is actually outside of the capitalist world system but, according to Wallerstein’s vision, as a particular historically evolved axis through which the appropriation of social labor by a capitalist world economy is organized as well as contested. By this I do not mean to portray indigenous people as “simply disappearing into the vast underclass of the capitalist periphery” (Lee 2006: 457). But I do want to contest the essential difference that much current scholarship rehearses between indigenous people and the rest of the working world. Pierre Clastres’s contrasting of people “with” and “without” history is unhelpful in understanding present realities, even if the phrase of “people without history” is meant ironically. Through the case of the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha in Kerala, this book will describe the complexities of an indigenist struggle led by people who are as much part of the capitalist world system as so-called working classes are. Where it is becoming increasingly popular, not just in the rhetoric of social movements but also in academic analysis, to distinguish what James C. Scott (2009)

calls “state-repellent” peoples versus state subjects, I want to think beyond this dichotomy of indigenous people and working classes. And I want to disrupt this common-sense dichotomy particularly where it is a product of capitalist governmentality. In chapter 1, I prepare the ground for this by discussing the notion of the tribe-class divide as it historically evolved, with particular attention to how it did so in Kerala. In chapter 2, I follow this up by tracing the more contemporary ways in which the notion of indigenous people as a politically distinct category developed in Kerala.

Let me briefly introduce here the context of the contemporary debate on the conceptual difference, if any, between indigenous and working people. Since it seems that in the past decades, the most counterhegemonic challenges to the present world system have been emanating from its margins rather than from within its core—from people identifying as indigenous rather than as workers (with the grand exception of China)—it is not surprising that increasingly from around the 1970s, we have seen a passionate effort in social science to rethink history from the margins. This includes steering clear of Eurocentric, nation-centric, and state-centric views and their tendency to posit the formal working class in core states and its struggle with capital as the main engine of history.

The Subaltern Studies school that emerged in the early 1980s¹ is a major such intervention from India. Its original program was to rewrite history beyond the teleology of the Indian nation-state and hence with much more attention to the role of peasants, tribals, and women in shaping and resisting what became known as India. Inspiration came from within the Marxist tradition and particularly the work of Gramsci² and E. P. Thompson (1970), both of whom were admired for their ability to hold in dialectical tension dimensions of social life—domination and resistance, culture and economy, elite and subaltern—that orthodox Marxism had by then reduced to sterile disjunctions. As Sumit Sarkar (1997) argues, Subaltern Studies scholars posited the notion of the subaltern to help avoid the pitfalls of economic reductionism while retaining a necessary emphasis on relations of power. The notion helped analyse collectivities of protest and transformation without positing them in terms of fixed and reified identities.

Around the same time, Eric R. Wolf (1982) promoted a similar critical turn in US anthropology with the publication of his seminal *Europe and the People Without History*. In it, Wolf sought to tell a relational world history of an expanding capitalist core and the populations and regions it incorporated, which from an imperial perspective

looked “static” and “without history.” Wolf worked within a Marxist (or, his preference, “Marxian”) tradition and the difference he tried to make in understanding the history of capitalist expansion was to emphasize “the world as a whole, a totality, a system, instead of as a sum of self-contained societies and cultures” (1982: 385). Paying due attention, as the Subaltern Studies school did, to the “autonomous” (not predetermined) development of non-European/nonhegemonic classes and communities, Wolf emphasized mutual (though unequal) conditioning within an evolving common social formation—the capitalist world system.

A similar effort in more relational historical theory was meanwhile taking place among European Marxist anthropologists (e.g. Meillassoux 1981), who were rethinking the essentialist distinctions current in the mode of production debate. Orthodox Marxism had seen the rise of capitalism in Western Europe and its subsequent hegemony over places like South Asia as caused by essential differences between the European or feudal mode of production and the Asian mode of production. The latter had supposedly dominated the history of Asia and, unlike feudalism, entailed an absolute incapacity for innovation. Rethinking this debate led to different explanations of Europe’s dominance, namely as resulting from uneven and combined development.

This post-1968 generation of scholars working to revitalize Marxist theory and critique its creeping dogmatism worked in tandem with a generation of political activists pursuing similar aims in terms of struggling for socialism but against Stalinism. Their aims differ significantly from the contemporary activist-intellectual project that latently builds on relational-historical Marxism but frames the exercise as one of criticism of (rather than critical engagement with) Marxist theory. As Sumit Sarkar (1997) has noted, on the trail of the Subaltern School there came a tendency toward “essentializing the categories of ‘subaltern’ and ‘autonomy’ in the sense of assigning to them more or less absolute, fixed decontextualized meanings and qualities” (1997: 304). We can see this move towards emphasizing the autonomy of indigenous people clearly for instance in the work of James Scott. In the 1970s and 1980s, Scott’s work already emphasized how state subjects—the Malaysian peasants struggling with the polarizing effects of the Green Revolution—have myriad ways of retaining a sense of autonomy under a surface of symbolic compliance. In *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), Scott then proceeded to map class struggle on the one hand and struggle against the state (for autonomy) on the other onto distinct geographical areas and types of peoples. Though he admits that his analysis of Zomia—upland

Southeast Asia—is based on more distant history and that the distinction may be approaching an end, the argument that emerges is popular in contemporary indigenous studies. According to this view, indigenous “state-repellent” peoples and state subjects are related in that they produce each other. They are not, however, related as part of a totality across which an accumulation of power—affecting them both—takes place. Indigenous, highland societies are moreover seen as emerging through a conscious choice to avoid the state. What is thereby ignored is the role of the state itself in defining indigeneity within its sphere of influence for its own interests.

Though Scott explicitly proposes a relational analysis, the relationality lies in that it connects categories and studies the organization of social labor within these categories. He does not study the ways in which social labor is mobilized and appropriated across these categories. If we look at indigenous people from the latter perspective, we see that most indigenous areas and people are seeing their social labor alienated and its value flowing towards an ever-expanding pool of global capital, managed through state power. Hence indigeneity becomes a particular axis of inequality, similar to ethnicity, gender or race in constituting a way in which social labor is organized and appropriated in a global division of labor. It moreover, necessarily, becomes an axis along which the struggle against this division of labor will take place. I see indigeneity not as a category outside of a capitalist world system but precisely one produced in as well as against it and hence in many ways continuous with other such categories. Indigeneity is not, to come back to the epigraph of this section, a stable social reality but, like peoplehood, “a clay-like historical product of the capitalist world economy through which the antagonistic forces struggle with each other” (Wallerstein 1987: 387). And like race and ethnicity, indigeneity has increasingly attained not just a global form but also a global content. Yet precisely because indigenism has come to stand for the fight against the capitalist world system as such (though it has originally also stood for the struggle to impose such a system and often still functions as such), it is easily essentialized as coming from outside of the system.

At a “tactical level of power” (Wolf 1990: 587), indigenism can be seen as indigenous people’s struggle to have to live “within, and also against, their own histories and their own cultures, and simultaneously within and against the histories and cultures that others try so intensely to impose upon them” (Sider 2003: xiii).³ At a more “structural level of power” (Wolf 1990: 587), indigenism is likewise best seen as a struggle both against and within global capitalism. For this

provides a more realistic perspective on what the struggle is about and what kind of alliances it can form. Indigeneity cannot only be an inspiration for others, an object through which to remind the world of the relative newness of the state and capitalism in world history—it also needs to be a position that can concretely ally with other struggles. This is not to deny, therefore, that indigeneity reflects a particular history but to open up this particularity to wider alliances. A question that follows from this perspective is, why do indigenous people increasingly struggle as indigenous people while there are potentially many other identifications open to them?

Framing Movements: From Class to Indigeneity

It takes the deconstruction of reified notions of indigeneity to realize that what is usually presented as the recent “rise of indigenous societies” is in fact largely a formal shift in political subjectivity—a question of a different framing of political initiatives. Hence we can ask why this shift took place. In finding an answer, however, there are few sources to rely on because most existing arguments on why we have seen a rise of indigenism in the last quarter of the twentieth century either essentialize indigenous people or ignore the existence of alternative political projects, notably socialist ones, in which indigenous people were engaged. Marc Becker (2008) is among the few authors who explicitly acknowledge the continuities between socialist and indigenist political initiatives in terms of people’s life histories and the trajectories of social movements. In his case, in Ecuador, he has done so as a historian, describing the process through time in detail, though without, as sociologists would, signaling key causal mechanisms for shifting ideological forms. Studies that do discuss causal mechanisms, on the other hand, usually fall into the categorical trap of considering “workers” and “indigenous people” to be necessarily different people and of ignoring the variety of forms of political mobilization (other than indigenism) that indigenous people were involved in. As an alternative to this, I have sought to focus on changing—rather than a priori different—forms of political subjectivity and mobilization while indeed connecting these changes to wider global processes.

There are researchers who have looked at the wider global processes underlying the rise of indigenism. They have tended to focus on the more immediately visible, organizational linkages involved. Ronald Niezen’s (2003) *Origins of Indigenism*, for instance, argues

that the rise of indigenous movements has been the product of new transnational strategies of organizing and funding and the political possibilities created with the democratization of authoritarian and colonial regimes. Niezen emphasizes the organizational efforts of indigenous people, particularly through the UN Working Group on Indigenous People, and demonstrates that it was a lot of work to create a feeling of commonness and sameness in a category of people (“indigenous people”) among whom in fact “the clearest expression of human diversity can be found” (2003: 2). Capitalist conditioning of the rise of indigenism only figures in Niezen’s work in a reference to “the destructive and assimilative forces of environmental degradation, state domination, and ethnic rivalry ... changing the world’s cultural landscape” (2003: 142), functioning as a threat against which indigenous people start organizing. Deborah Yashar’s work in Latin America on “why indigenous movements have emerged now and not before” and why they have organized “along ethnic lines to promote an explicitly indigenous agenda” (2005: 5) likewise argues that the neoliberal restructuring that took place in Latin American countries from the late 1970s onward posed a threat to the autonomy and economic viability of indigenous communities, which people had creatively managed to maintain under previous corporatist citizenship regimes. This threat motivated indigenous people to organize.

I argue that while transnational organizing and new communication technologies have played a role in the consolidation of an international indigenous movement, it was not merely the threat of capitalism that conditioned the rise of indigenism. For the threat of capitalism—as if an outside force—does not explain why social conflicts have stopped being framed as class struggle and have instead been reinterpreted and enacted as concerning “indigeneity”; why people used to see their poverty or oppression as a result of how they were relationally positioned vis-à-vis richer people but over time have instead come to see this as the result of discrimination directed at them for being of indigenous background; why social movements of the past are reinterpreted as not actually having been about left versus right, peasant and worker versus capitalist, or poor versus rich, but about nonindigenous oppressing indigenous people (see also Nelson 2003: 123). To understand these shifts in the language and forms of resistance, it is necessary both to analyze how older forms became ineffective or unfeasible and to study how political shifts are embedded in people’s changing everyday experiences of making a living, in turn shaped by changing capitalist dynamics (cf. Harvey 2003). Such a focus leads me to argue in the second part

of this book that the rise of indigenism is not only about an indigenous criticism of globalization or of greater possibilities for communication and organizational resources available to indigenous people but also about the ideological disintegration of the kind of socialist movements indigenous people had been part of earlier, together with political-economic changes that dispossessed many people of the material basis of perceiving themselves as worker-citizens.

Global Systemic Cycles and Critical Struggles

“Viewing social movements as units of analysis ... risks cultural and historical abstraction. We invert this procedure, viewing struggles as units of observation, not in comparative relation to one another, but in relation to a shared political-economic conjuncture. We view them as expressing this historical moment, and their cognitive engagement is precisely with the terms or claims of this neo-liberal conjuncture” (McMichael 2010: 5).

“Critical struggles” is the dialectical approach Philip McMichael advocates of contextualizing social movements in relation to global processes, including understanding their position and structuring within the world system. But it is also about making the dialectical counter-move of studying social movements to see what they tell us about the current conjuncture in the world system. A critical struggles perspective aims hence to be both realistic and liberating—it studies social movements through the lens of existing theories of global capitalism but then is attentive to how social movements may change our understanding of existing global structures. The critical struggles approach should be kept in mind as a counterweight to the structural determinism of the theories capturing the systemic forces behind the rise of indigenism, which I turn to now.

Jonathan Friedman has consistently called for studying indigenous movements not just within their particular national contexts but also as part of a dynamic and multiplex global system that constitutes a field of analysis that must be “our central focus for understanding” (1999: 391f). Friedman’s “global systemic anthropology” is hence aimed at understanding “both the world and the cultural identities and derivative discourses that are generated by the structures of that world” (Friedman 2000: 648). What is nowadays called “globalization,” according to Friedman, should not be seen as a new era but rather as a cyclically returning historical phase. The fact that from the mid-1970s capital is increasingly exported from the post-World War II

centers of global hegemony—especially of course from the United States—is symptomatic of the kind of economic crisis accompanying a period of “hegemonic decline,” when costs of reproduction in the core lead to capital fleeing elsewhere while no new global hegemon has yet emerged (Ekholm-Friedman and Friedman 2003). Periods of hegemonic decline are also characterized by “double polarization”: vertically in terms of class stratification of astounding proportions (*ibid.*: 10), but at the same time horizontally as modernist identification (e.g., that of citizenship) declines and is substituted by all kinds of “rooted” forms of identity (*ibid.*: 7). The rise of indigenous movements can be seen as an expression of a “transformation-fragmentation” process of identification in the world system that follows the “disintegration of homogenizing processes that were the mainstays of the nation state” (Friedman 2000: 650).

These global systemic cycles, however, can be found throughout the last 5000 years of history, so we need to further specify the present cycle and India’s position in it. David Harvey argues that the present cycle of world history is characterized specifically by a neoliberal counter-reaction to the gains made by working classes over capital in the post-World War II period. Neoliberalism is the political process accompanying a more structural shift that Harvey (2003) has characterized as a move from “expanded reproduction” to “accumulation by dispossession” as the dominant mode through which capital reproduces itself. Kalyan Sanyal (2013) argued that in a postcolonial capitalist context such as India, this process does not simply swell the ranks of the unemployed—the reserve army of labor—but leads to a much more literal creation of a surplus population, of people that are not only dispossessed but altogether excluded from “the circuit of capital” and basically have no way of subsisting anymore. According to Partha Chatterjee (2008), under conditions of electoral democracy, the Indian government, though subservient to corporate/financial capital in its economic policies, is then driven to try to “reverse the effects of dispossession” through the generation of “governmental policies” to enable certain populations that are made surplus to subsist. Such welfare policies are usually extended in rather ad hoc, random and exclusionary ways to the denizens of “political society” who hence become encouraged to spend their political energies on competing against each other on the basis of categorical identities.⁴

Some “absolutely marginal groups”—mostly Adivasis, according to Chatterjee (2008)—do not even pose enough of a potential threat to be invited to join the competition for benefits and are presumably those most likely to become attracted to the Naxalite path of armed

isolation. Adivasi groups in post-reform Kerala, unlike some Adivasi groups in central and north-eastern India, are not, however, “absolutely marginal” in Chatterjee’s sense of falling outside of political society. There are moreover remarkable differences between the politics of a movement like the AGMS and those political formations primarily shaped by—and aimed at—governmental policies for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe populations, which do absorb the political energies of many subaltern groups in other parts of India (e.g., see Lerche 2008). As I will demonstrate in detail in this book, structural shifts in global capitalism and political governance certainly play a role in the rise of indigenism in Kerala but need to be understood in more complex ways than elsewhere in order to make sense in the particular context of Kerala.

To return to a critical struggles perspective it is necessary to not only grasp social movements’ positions in world-historical processes but also to read the world through struggles for social change. Such a perspective cannot rely on the past as a finished product, in which struggles that never managed to put their stamp on history have no further meaning or consequence. In light of contemporary changes, “the content of pastness necessarily constantly changes” even though “since ... pastness is by definition an assertion of the constant past, no one can ever admit that any particular past has ever changed or could possibly change” (Wallerstein 1987: 381). The rise of indigenism may well signal a disintegrative process in the global system, but it is also important to see how indigenism itself intervenes in these processes and thereby also unsettles established histories. A closer study of indigenism in light of the struggles that preceded it reveals that it need not be just the symptom of declining hegemony in the world system. The meaning of acquiring a piece of land, for instance, can signal a back-to-the-land trend typical of the demise of national developmentalism in periods of hegemonic decline, but it can also be read as the completion of a land reform that never happened for all social classes, coupled with an awareness of the difficulty of making a living of farming under neoliberal conditions and the need for a broader alliance that can confront global capital’s grip on agriculture. Indigenism can signal disintegration when looked at from a global systems perspective but integration when studied more closely in terms of what people are trying to accomplish on the ground. It indeed signals the collapse of the alternative of the Soviet Bloc and its sponsoring of socialist politics in certain pockets but it also signals an opening for international, space-making socialism of the kind that refuses to be locked into desperate national bastions. The analy-

sis in this book thus moves within this dialectical tension between a historical-realist and a praxis-oriented perspective.

From this critical struggles approach, a struggle such as that led by the AGMS should also be considered a historical force in itself, not merely a site where we can capture the nature of inevitable structural changes. Satheese Chandra Bose and Shiju Sam Varughese make a similar argument when they suggest that instead of perceiving certain identities as outliers of developmental modernity—which is often the case with Adivasis vis-à-vis the Kerala model of development—we had better “bring into analysis their engagement with the multiple/alternative registers of development which shape Kerala modernity differently” (2015: 8). Reading capitalist change and modernity through the lens of social movements introduces the human element of will and hence indeterminacy. It opens up the possibility that as the future unfolds under the influence of these movements, they may well force us to reinterpret the past they grew out of. “Critical struggles” are about keeping in mind Marx’s famous call to philosophers to start changing, rather than merely understanding, the world. This does not mean that social scientists should drop their pens but that there is a relational interconnectedness of intellectual and material processes and that hence our understanding of the world is a product of social change, but at the same time, as McMichael emphasizes, helps produce social change. Hence though we need theories that capture the coherent logic of large-scale processes, there is no neutral and complete theory that explains the world independent of history as it evolves and as we are part of it. This book certainly foregrounds a theoretically informed contextualization of the rise of indigenism, against a tendency in indigenous studies to focus entirely on the messages and intentions of indigenous movements and treat the context of their struggle as the all-too-well-known structure of oppression they resist. On the other hand, this is no dry, objectivist exercise but rather an effort to understand the world as part of changing it.

For a Dialectic of Discovery and Interpretation

The theoretical intervention outlined above builds on a particular methodological approach to connecting global and local processes, which I will lay out here. This approach follows a “place-making perspective” that does not, as classic anthropological “thick descriptions” do, collapse space and place by analogy (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:7) but instead sees peoples, cultures, and places as relational constructs

shaped in time and space. The question is, if not through analogy, then how to connect the local and the global? One way is through an “ethnography of global connection” (Tsing 2004), akin to multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus 1995), which traces the global empirically according to the “travels” of goods, people, ideas, organizations or corporations. Against this empiricist emphasis that refuses to engage with the global as a totality and traces the global only inductively, I propose a historical-realist, dialectical methodology as more suitable to yielding insights that can inform political praxis. I will take Anna Tsing’s (2004) method of global connection as a starting point because it exemplifies how despite the desire to move away from the determinism attributed to Marxism, the solution of purely inductive theorizing in fact ends up reproducing the parameters of the status quo.

Tsing’s methodology is explicitly aimed at avoiding the universalism of globalization theories, which she finds Marxist approaches particularly complicit with. She argues that “rather than assume we know exactly what global capitalism is, even before it arrives, we need to find out how it operates in friction” (2004: 12). Hence theories that grapple with a whole, a universal, or a capitalist world system need to be “destabilized” by tracing exactly how “universals” travel and create the ruse of universalism. This method would, according to Tsing, open up the notion of globalization beyond the inevitable and unauthored process it supposedly is in Marxist theory. In fact, actual Marxist theorists of global-local connection, such as Immanuel Wallerstein or Terrence Hopkins, are equally convinced that methodology is even more crucial than theory. As Lukacs (1923) before them claimed, Marxism’s most important intervention lies not in defending a particular theory but in working with a dialectical method. The difference with Tsing is that this method is used to build on and sharpen existing theory, rather than ignore it. Existing Marxist theory is a starting point but never an endpoint.

In the context of Tsing’s rejection of Marxist (or any noninductive) theory, we may recall, in the earlier postmodern turn towards the constant deconstruction of “grand narratives,” Eric Wolf’s (1990) intervention:

We need to be professionally suspicious of our categories and models; we should be aware of their historical and cultural contingencies; we can understand a quest for explanation as approximations of truth rather than truth itself. But I also believe that the search for explanation in anthropology can be cumulative; that knowledge and insight gained in the past can generate new questions, and that new departures can incorporate the accomplishments of the past. (587)

Mere description and interpretation are thus not enough: anthropologists also need to provide explanations. It was frustrating to see that with the postmodern turn so much explanatory work done in anthropology was merely deconstructed without being reconstructed: new generations of anthropologists were always inventing the wheel. Hence Wolf (1990: 588) worried that “[a]s each successive approach carries the ax to its predecessors, anthropology comes to resemble a project in intellectual deforestation”.

A contemporary source of anthropological deforestation comes, I think, in the guise of methodological empiricism in face of the global. It is often said—with echoes in Tsing’s work—that understanding global capitalism is boring, that it brings nothing new, and that what is instead interesting is exactly how people, things, and ideas travel through global networks, assemblages, and chains. Hence comes the methodology of “global connection”, focusing solely on how the global is constituted in and by the local and refusing the dialectical countermove of studying how the local is constituted in and by the global. Tsing does not see this problem as she actually claims to be doing both: she says she not only studies how “minorities have accommodated themselves to global forces” but also studies global forces as “congeries of local/global interaction” (2004:3). We are then still left to continue with the unlikely assumption that these minorities’ constitution preceded the history of the modern world system. Tsing does not engage in what Terence Hopkins (1978) called “concretization”: the effort of taking seemingly concrete things like an ethnic group, a local practice or material fact as abstractions that only make sense because of the actual “concrete” whole that they are part of. Since this whole is the “totality” of social relations, and the method of concretization can in that sense be called “totalizing”, it has become easy to rhetorically dismiss it. An advantage, however, is that it can guide a quest for the conjectures where political praxis is possible. Without a theory of the totality of social relations, we can—as Tsing does—discover agency everywhere, and everywhere to an equal extent, since there is no concept of the structure this agency is supposed to defy.

Tsing sees the shift from class politics to indigenism as having happened because of the way “indigenous voice” traveled through a process of “friction”—both grip and tension—through different settings, eventually forming different “traveling models” of indigenism. This is similar to how Eva-Maria Hardtmann (2003), inspired by George Marcus’s multi-sited fieldwork, describes her practice of doing fieldwork on Dalit movements as “following the field”. The field, in this interpretation, is understood as a relational network that can be traced

not just along material objects but also according to plot lines, themes and symbols, and actors and their life histories. Such fieldwork that branches out in various directions and unpacks supralocal influences into various threads indeed opens up “the global.” Initially inspired by Tsing’s work—as well as that of Hardtman—I too sought to see indigenism in Kerala not as a homogeneous place-bound phenomenon but as a complex and varied set of political articulations that travel to places where the dominant themes of the “model” (Tsing) or “plot” (Marcus/Hardtman) have some purchase, but then often become transformed. I was also interested in how these travels encounter what Tsing calls “gaps” (2004: 175)—“conceptual spaces and real places into which powerful demarcations do not travel well.” Burawoy (2000), building a Marxist approach to “global ethnography,” similarly calls for attention to “disconnections,” which are equally important to think with as positive connections are.

My problem with Tsing’s methodology, however, is that it does not go beyond providing descriptions of how things happened: the friction-ridden travels of indigenous voice cannot provide explanations of why indigenism arose in Kerala at a particular point in world history. Why did global discourses of indigenism start resonating with local history and experience in Kerala in the 1990s and not earlier? Tracing the “travels” of indigenous models in Kerala does not provide the answer here and would ignore how the local is produced by—and not just “adapts to” or “is in dialogue with”—the global.

The need to go beyond a methodology of tracing direct empirical connections became even clearer to me from the fact that such transnational connections were not all that strong in the case of Kerala. C. K. Janu, the leader of the main indigenist movement in Kerala, whom we will meet frequently in the pages of this book, did travel abroad in the late 1990s, and, through the media, indigenist notions originating in other contexts (e.g., the globally circulating speech by Chief Seattle) did, of course, enter Kerala. Yet, as I came to see it, this transnational influence merely provided the language and symbols—the dressing—for a more structural shift in political mobilization that was at once more locally and more globally produced. In refusing to go beyond ethnographic theory, Tsing leaves the process generally denoted as “globalization” or “neoliberalism”—but better theorized as an ongoing process of capitalist transformation—unpacked. While Tsing claims to want to undermine globalization’s universal pretensions, it remains an unchallenged and apparently uninteresting “background” or “discourse” in her description of the global rise of indigenism. She thus provides no answer to the question of how

exactly the capitalist world economy conditions political mobilization in different places around the world at different, but connected, times: how the local, all the way down to people's political subjectivities, is shaped by the global as much as our understanding of the global is reshaped by emergent political subjectivities.

A dialectical relational-historical perspective suggests that indigenism, locally perceived as the quest on behalf of an original society to confront its subjugation to the world system, at the same time signals a disintegrative relational process unfolding in those regions, and among those population groups, where the increased mobility that capital won for itself since the late 1970s is destroying local regimes of labor in favor of "accumulation by dispossession." In this book, I will demonstrate that this argument needs refinement in terms of what is happening in those areas where it is not an alliance of finance capital and the state that is physically dispossessing people of their land but where, as in the case of Kerala, the mobility of global capital is gradually putting such pressure on local economies that the kind of livelihoods and public provisions characterizing a previous phase of global capitalism became largely impossible or overshadowed by private capital.

By studying the political economy of Kerala and how it has changed in recent history, I am not simply looking at "local conditions" that explain why traveling models of indigenism stick or not, but at globally produced local processes, not authored by a handful of activists or capitalists, but by a complex totality we need to try to understand in its systematic qualities. I can agree with Tsing and others that this does not mean the process is "unauthored," but precisely because there are so many authors involved we need structural relational analysis. A description of globalization's main plots and actors necessarily has to be complemented by a more theoretical understanding of the totality of unequal social relations involved. The systematic qualities of this totality are not unaffected by indigenist politics: having an idea of the structuring forces of the capitalist world economy also gives us the chance to see where and how indigenism actually intervenes in it. What I aim for thereby is not just the discovery of what Tsing calls "agency" but the search for praxis, the kind of agency that confronts the structural logic of capitalism. And this in turn can only be discovered through the dialectic of moving from the local (ethnography) to the global (theory) and back. I thus share Tsing's worry about the determinedness of capitalism—its power to exert limits and put pressure on what is possible at a particular point in time—but my methodological answer is not to retreat into empiri-

cism to the neglect of theory. Rather my answer is a commitment to a dialectical method that constantly moves between using and adjusting theories, that helps understand the world, what's happening in it, and how human action may strategically intervene in it. As Michael Burawoy puts it: "By throwing up anomalies history is continually forcing the reconstruction of Marxism, leading, in turn, to the reconstruction of history but also of possible futures" (2009: 150).

A Glimpse into Fieldwork: Reflexivity and Academic Labor

For the reader to be able to situate my research, I would like to offer a glimpse of the particular experiences and relations that shaped it. Since I grew up in different countries of the global South, "development" was an obvious interest of mine as a young student. Yet I became more interested in the global structures producing underdevelopment and the ways in which local people had resisted these than in becoming a development practitioner. Hence my attraction to Kerala, where so-called development clearly had been achieved not through development aid but rather through political struggle. Arriving in Kerala and visiting the Communist headquarters in Trivandrum for the first time in 2003, I received "red salutes" to welcome me as "a comrade from the Netherlands." I had some side thoughts about the ritual performance of the salutes and my own ritual acceptance of them, but undeniably they also made me feel connected, part of an ongoing historical struggle. Soon I became closely befriended to Jain Vasudevan, a journalist for the Communist daily, the *De-shabhimani*, who adopted me into his family and taught me a great deal about the Communist movement in Kerala. Becoming less of an outsider, I also, however, started to feel the consequent restrictions on exploring the challenge posed to the Communist movement by the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha as my Communist friend's family history and work was entirely bound up with unconditional loyalty to the Communist Party. Neighborhood gossip about my improper gender behavior (walking about alone as a woman) moreover had the potential of affecting his family's reputation. Hence we decided I would undertake my actual fieldwork, in 2005–2006, disconnected from my initial network in Kerala. In this, the two female research assistants I found, recently graduated from the Department of English at Kozhikode University, were invaluable. Though they would hate to describe themselves as "feminist" (understandable, considering

the matriarchal forms of feminism prevalent in Kerala), they were certainly radical in their criticism of existing gender norms in Kerala. Apart from helping with translation, they thus also greatly helped me in sharpening my thoughts on gender relations in Kerala.

My research assistants were also unique in that they accompanied me despite the caste and particularly gender taboos in Kerala on unmarried, educated young women hanging out in poor people's colonies, outside the vigilance of family networks.⁵ There was one colony, in Wayanad—the district where the AGMS emerged—where we returned to almost weekly, often several days a week, during the year of fieldwork I did (and with return visits later on). We befriended the woman active in running the kindergarten (*anganwadi*) there, and people saw that we kept on returning to the colony. Thus those people of the colony who initially had seemed suspicious of our presence seemed after a while to appreciate the interest we took in their stories. Though most adults of the colony had hardly attended school, we soon discovered this made their views more unpredictable and interesting than those of more educated Malayalees. Most people, moreover, had enough confidence to interview me back about what my interest in their colony was all about and what could be in it for them—questions I usually answered by explaining I was writing a book on the movement they took part in, that there was nothing directly in it for them perhaps, but that I was doing my best to make sure their struggles would not be forgotten. Of course this was all perhaps a bit too immaterial for many, so I took the slightly risky step of sponsoring the acquisition of a television and antenna for the woman we were closest to in the colony—the only setup I could think of that might contribute something at least semipublic to the colony.⁶ After many visits to the colony, I started to feel so comfortable with the people there that it was a shock to see photos reminding me of the embodied difference between us: standing beside them I looked like a white giant almost twice their size.

In breaks from fieldwork with my research assistants among AGMS activists and Adivasi workers in Northern Kerala—in the colony I just described, but also in other colonies and at several land occupations—I traveled throughout Kerala, and sometimes over its borders, to meet activists of other political groupings, scholars working on Adivasi issues, bureaucrats in charge of implementing Adivasi development plans, cultural producers of purportedly Adivasi art, journalists who had been reporting on the AGMS, politicians active for the Adivasi cause, environmentalists and landlords with distinct views on “the tribal question,” social workers in charge of Adivasi

welfare, and tourism promoters interested in using the potential in Adivasi culture to attract more tourists to “God’s own country” (as the Ministry of Tourism has branded Kerala). I moreover spent several months with Dalit-Adivasi activists in Central Kerala, one of whom, Sunny M. Kapicadu, hosted me in his family home and became a good friend. Sunny’s critique of the Keralese variant of Marxism as a cover-up for upper-caste dominance helped me greatly in sharpening my thoughts. Together my research assistants, my Communist friends and my Dalit activist friends all had a tremendous, critical impact on my research, though their views were often conflicting. Their influence is not random—it is a reflection of the kind of informants and research assistants I sought. Despite the sympathy I have for each, I never seriously considered following reflexive experiments such as explicitly combining activism and ethnography or co-authoring my text. I think anthropologists have a distinct, critical role to play where they are not part of the social movement(s), and social networks, they study (e.g., see Edelman 2001). Not coauthoring, I preserve some of the intellectual freedom that a relative outsider has.

As a final methodological note, I must point out that fieldwork relations are not the only relations that shape anthropological research. I was lucky to be able to pursue most of the research that this book is based on as a PhD student at the Central European University in Budapest, a private but not profit-oriented international university where narrow political and economic interests had little leverage over the content of my work.⁷ The space for such academic freedom has, however, been narrowing in Europe. Within academia, one’s position and career are ideally structured such that no particular political movement, state imperative, corporate interest or kinship network has leverage over the contents or conclusions of research projects. However, with the “global marketing of knowledge production” since the 1980s, many countries have seen a shift away from this ideal of academic knowledge production toward a conception of the university as a transnational business corporation where research activities are defined in terms of commercial interests and entrepreneurial outcomes (Shore 2010: 27f). In the process, we see a replacement of “professional relationships based on collegiality and trust with a regime of measurement, performativity and surveillance,” creating entirely contradictory incentives and ultimately “schizophrenic academic subjects” (ibid.). A critical awareness of (and struggle against) such processes that threaten to replace critical anthropology with “anthropreneurship” is hence a necessary complement to more fieldwork-centered reflexivity. For the racism that many anthropologists

of the colonial period have been criticized for, and that indigenous people in particular have suffered from, was not due to a general ignorance of anthropologists at the time. Rather, it was the outcome of powerful mechanisms that tied anthropologists' careers to the compromises they made with the institutions endowing them with their professional status. Unfortunately, such mechanisms have in many ways only gotten a greater grip over anthropologists' careers since the formal end of European imperialism.

Conclusion

Certain times and places make it easier for the researcher to stick to the kind of theoretical and methodological approach sketched in this chapter than others. In places where "liberal-culturalism" reigns (see Steur 2005), where indigeneity has become fixed as a coherent and fiercely defensive identity discourse (as in the United States), my research project would have been difficult. Outside of these centers of liberal culturalism, in regions that have known strong socialist movements that continue to disrupt culturalist discourses on indigeneity, my project is a much more likely one. In Latin America, for instance, one could, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, find a lot of blurring of indigenous and class politics. The Zapatista rebellion is a case in point: some anthropologists, such as June Nash (2001), have been impressed by the Mayan cosmologies it apparently based itself on, whereas others, such as Neil Harvey (1998), see it as a continuation of the struggle for land and democracy that socialist groups had historically been waging in the region. Just over the border, in Guatemala, there was an explicit controversy on indigenous versus class interpretations of the civil war. As Diane Nelson (2003) describes, the war was no longer interpreted, as it was in the 1980s, as a "class war with ethnic components" but was now claimed, by so-called *culturales*, to have been a racist war perpetrated by right and left against the indigenous Maya. Or, to move further south, in Bolivia some have emphasized how Evo Morales was the country's first indigenous president, while others have pointed out that Morales himself had identified above all as a Trotskyite unionist (e.g., cf. Gordon 2009 and Postero 2006).

The Confederation of Peasant Trade Unions of Bolivia confronted the tensions between class and ethnicity head-on by stating in 1983, "We refuse to accept and will never accept class reductionist ideas which transform us to the status of mere 'peasants' ... Nor do we

accept ethnic reductionism which transforms our struggle into a confrontation between ‘Indians’ and ‘whites’” (Yashar 2005: 179). I have written this book in the spirit of such refusal and emphasize that where I use words such as “workers” or “indigenous people”, these should always be taken to signify contingent and relational rather than primordial identities. Sitting in the crossfire between, on the one hand, indigenist groups who refuse to accept Marxist thinking can be anything but hypocritical, and, on the other hand, socialists who choose to consider indigenist activists as opportunists or even racists, is not too comfortable. Yet, I felt I had to use my position as a sympathetic outsider, moving between indigenist and Communist activists, to try to contribute to a political space beyond the common sense⁸ that helps to fix the indigenist and the Marxist positions into a deadlock. Kerala is a rather unique ground to study the tensions between indigenism and Marxism precisely because the active confrontation of the two in Kerala tends to lay bare the complexities involved perhaps even more clearly than in Latin American settings.

I must, then, add a few words here about Kerala’s “exceptionalism” and the question of what lessons we may learn from the Kerala experience. As Ritty Lukose puts it, Kerala is without doubt “part of India” (2009: 23ff.) and differences it has with the rest of India have developed precisely because of particular historical processes that have unfolded within the Indian peninsula in its interaction with the wider world. “Local history” or “tradition” in Kerala includes the many overseas influences that have shaped and become part of Kerala for at least two centuries as much as it does the matrilineal inheritance forms and extremely rigid caste system that have characterized Kerala in the nineteenth century. Kerala is thus not an exception but a particular relational conjunction in a wider historical trajectory. Kerala is particularly interesting for my research because of the degree to which a Communist program of land reform, wage protection, and other social rights was implemented, the extent to which the ideology of Communism is part of many people’s common-sense understanding of the world in Kerala, and the fact that the Communist movement managed to gain power in Kerala within an overall democratic framework. However, the state government, even when in Communist hands, is much more social-democratic in its policy-making than the formal Communist label suggests. It has confronted the challenges of capitalist crisis without immediately creating the stark levels of class polarization and poverty that have developed in other parts of India (see Sandbrook et al. 2007), but liberalization has nevertheless intensified the relational production of what Charles Tilly

(2001) would call “categorical inequalities”. Recent reform has led to the steady dismantling of the historical architecture of the Kerala model and created economic and social problems that are probably better termed “hazards” than “challenges” (Oommen 2010). As this book will show, projects for local social democracy do not hold out against the onslaught of neoliberalism indefinitely. The need for a global confrontation with capital remains.

The most notable quality of Kerala to the study of the rise of indigenism is that modern indigenism has only recently emerged in the state. Since it is not yet a well-oiled or institutionalized program, the variety of interpretations of indigenism and indigenous identity are striking. In addition to this, “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2003) is a more subtle process in Kerala than elsewhere in India. This adds to making an explanation of the rise of indigenism based on primordial identities or an abstract “threat to indigenous livelihood” unsatisfactory—it forced me to move along the theoretical and methodological lines sketched in this chapter, in order to reach a better explanation for the rise of indigenism. The degree to which Kerala’s indigenist movement incorporates a variety of political strands and constantly veers into counterhegemonic directions—in the interest of working-class rather than landed Adivasis, in the interest of broad alliances confronting social inequalities rather than in the interest of exclusive communities—also forced me to consider the possibility that indigenism is not just a reaction to global forces but also a reincarnation, by other means, of past struggles for emancipation. Hence I was guided towards certain explanations and openings not just by my theoretical and methodological insights, but also by what I encountered in Kerala itself. Eric Wolf’s work shows how history is constantly in the process of creating “hidden histories” (Schneider and Rapp 1995). This is particularly so when it comes to failed or fragile attempts at socialist solidarity or complex relational understandings of indigenous identity. I therefore think that the traces of the complex interrelation of socialist and indigenist politics that were so clearly visible in Kerala also may help scholars studying the rise of indigenism in other contexts become more sensitive to articulating such hidden histories.