

SOWA, Frank, 2014 *Indigene Völker in der Weltgesellschaft: Die kulturelle Identität der grönländischen Inuit im Spannungsfeld von Kultur und Natur*, Bielefeld, transcript Verlag, 435 pages

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2014 *Indigene Völker in der Weltgesellschaft: Die kulturelle Identität der grönländischen Inuit im Spannungsfeld von Kultur und Natur*, Bielefeld, transcript Verlag, 435 pages

In his book *Indigene Völker in der Weltgesellschaft: Die kulturelle Identität der grönländischen Inuit im Spannungsfeld von Kultur und Natur* (“Indigenous peoples in the world polity: The cultural identity of Greenlandic Inuit between nature and culture”), Frank Sowa argues that in today’s world global discourses can have powerful effects on local communities. Taking the example of two global discourses (the ecological discourse and the discourse on Indigenous peoples), Sowa shows that they provide concepts and frames of reference that affect how Greenlandic Inuit are perceived by others, and how they see themselves. At the same time, these discourses can be used strategically in the global political arena, such as in debates at the International Whaling Commission (IWC) about the rights of Greenlandic Inuit to engage in whaling.

Written in German, the book consists of nine chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the theoretical framework. Sowa draws on Meyer’s (2005) concept of “world polity,” an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) based on a global cultural order, with strong roots in Western society. Discourses, informed by and legitimized through research in the humanities and the natural sciences, spread and are adopted locally. They provide models for understanding and representing oneself in relation to others and in relation to the natural environment.

The book’s strength lies in its analyses of the characteristics and development of the two global discourses (Chapters 3 and 4) and of local actors’ positioning with regard to these discourses, drawing on interviews in Greenland (Chapters 5 to 8) and Japan (Chapter 8). The ecological discourse (Chapter 3) and the discourse on Indigenous peoples (Chapter 4) are analyzed with impressive detail and historical depth. Both chapters offer insights from relevant scholarly literature and from analyses of key historical documents. Put simply (and without doing justice to the detailed argument presented by Sowa), the ecological discourse assumes an ideal state of nature that is threatened by industrialization and economic growth. Thus, nature becomes a scarce good that must be conserved through careful management informed by scientific research. Sowa traces the origins of this discourse to the late 19th century, with the coming together of the rational-scientific discourse and the aesthetic-moral discourse on nature, both with long histories in Western thought. Insights from research in economics and the natural sciences encouraged political activism in the 1980s, which in turn led to global dissemination and acceptance of this discourse.

Chapter 4 gives an historical overview of representations of Greenlandic Inuit from the 18th century to the early 21st century. Sowa notes that most of the representations were based on perceptions by outsiders (Danes and Europeans) and reflected their worldviews and values, rather than those of Greenlandic Inuit themselves. In the late 20th century, the image of the “noble ecological savage,” the predominant image at that time, was adopted by the Greenlandic intellectual and political elite. Greenlandic Inuit were portrayed as being close to and respectful of nature, as a people who always used their resources sustainably. Sowa argues that in light of the historical evidence (he refers to texts by Egede, Cranz, and Fabricius, as well as research by Søbby), this seems to be a retrospective, ideologically-based ascription that was deployed strategically by Greenlanders in order to obtain recognition and influence in global arenas. This point suggests a fruitful avenue for future research, based on analysis of a wider range of sources, to gain a more nuanced understanding of how existing self-perceptions and global discourses were combined. In the case of Greenland, relevant texts are available from the 1860s onwards (see Langgård 1998).

The next three chapters (5 to 7) are based on in-depth interviews with 20 Greenlandic Inuit and six Europeans (Danes and Germans), conducted in Greenland between 2000 and 2002. Chapter 5 on Greenlandic food (*kalaalimernit*) as a symbol of Greenlandic identity, shows how local definitions of *kalaalimernit* reflect elements of global discourses on Indigenous peoples and culture. Chapter 6 focuses on the interviewees with Danes and Germans in Greenland. Sowa shows that the way in which they see their own relationship with nature fits neatly with the global ecological discourse. In the second part of the chapter, Sowa shows that according to his European interviewees the Greenlandic Inuit’s relationship with nature differs from their own, most importantly perhaps through an emphasis on using (rather than conserving) nature. They attribute this in part to Greenlandic Inuit culture, drawing on elements of the discourse on Indigenous peoples.

In Chapter 7, the focus shifts to Greenlandic Inuit and their positioning in relation to global discourses. Sowa identifies four positions (“traditionalist,” “intermediary,” “emancipatory,” and “hedonistic-communitarian”) taken by his interviewees. He shows the variety of views among Greenlandic Inuit on their cultural identity, and suggests the ways in which these differences reflect and draw on elements of global discourses. Sowa includes long quotations from the interviews, thus making these three chapters vivid and fascinating reading. However, the richness of the interview material also suggests that for Chapters 6 and 7 a more detailed, theme-based analysis could have been illuminating. The data could have provided a basis for a more detailed comparison of the views expressed by Greenlandic Inuit with the elements in global ecological discourse and global discourse on Indigenous peoples, as well as with the Europeans’ views (see Chapter 6). Such a comparison might also have provided a way to integrate data from three interviews that did not fit into any of the four positions.

Taking the debates about Greenlandic subsistence whaling and Japanese coastal whaling at the International Whaling Commission (IWC) as examples, Chapter 8 shows that global discourses can be used strategically in the world polity. For Indigenous peoples, the IWC permits “aboriginal subsistence whaling.” To maintain permission to

engage in whaling, Greenlanders therefore have to document that their whale hunting fits into this category, forcing them to perpetuate a rigid view of their culture. By contrast, as part of a nation perceived as modern, coastal Japanese communities are denied the right to engage in whaling, even though they and the Greenlandic Inuit share similar whale hunting practices and a similar cultural attachment to whaling. Though perhaps beyond the scope of this book, it would have been interesting to see some examples showing how these discourses figure in the arguments used in negotiations at the IWC.

In the last chapter, Sowa discusses the role of experts, both from the humanities and from the natural sciences. He argues that the scientific community is the locus of definitional power in the world polity. Once established, categories like nature, culture, or Indigenous peoples are considered universal, with little leeway for change. The result is a “musealization” that pressures Indigenous people to conform to existing, rigid definitions of Indigenousness in order to qualify for subsistence whaling. If they are seen as “too modern,” these rights might be questioned (as is the case with Japan).

Overall, this ambitious, wide-ranging, and well-researched book will not only interest those with a special interest in Greenland, but also more generally scholars and students interested in issues of globalization, cultural identity, representation, the relationship between people and their environment, and environmentalist movements, among others. Teachers of undergraduate or postgraduate courses will be pleased that individual chapters can stand on their own and will undoubtedly provide students with excellent reading material (in German). For those who cannot read German, a summary of Chapters 3 and 4, as well as a later version of Chapter 5 are available in English (Sowa 2013, 2015).

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