

**INDIGENIZATION ADVOCACY AND THE ACADEMIC UNIVERSITY:
Legitimizing Wishful Thinking, Superstition and Demagoguery**

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The desire for the truth is in itself a legitimate motive, and it is a motive that should not be sacrificed to gratify social, professional, or spiritual desires. Those who violate their own intellectual integrity, for the sake of values they hold more dear, corrupt the very values for which they make the sacrifice. To sacrifice intellectual integrity for spiritual yearnings or political hopes is sentimental and weak-minded, and to sacrifice it for professional ambition is cynical and ignoble

—Joseph Carroll

...my goal is to defend what one might call a scientific *worldview*—defined broadly as a respect for evidence and logic, and for the incessant confrontation of theories with the real world; in short, for reasoned argument over wishful thinking, superstition and demagoguery

— Alan Sokal

Over the last two years, the notion of “Indigenizing the Academy” has become prominent. Endorsements have increased in intensity with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s demand that “[t]he education system itself must be transformed into one that rejects the racism embedded in colonial systems of education and treats Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian knowledge systems with equal respect”.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s support for indigenization is an indication of the politicization of the initiative. The main goal of indigenization is the supposed “reconciliation” of aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples through “decolonization.” It is also assumed, however, that the political goals of indigenization will not conflict with academic aspirations (hence the use of the words truth *and* reconciliation); there is no consideration that political pressure on universities tends to have the opposite effect.

The politicized character of indigenization is acting, in fact, to seriously undermine the academic mandate of universities—ensuring academic freedom and upholding standards of excellence in teaching and scholarship. This is because “decolonization” processes actually amount to demands for censorship and the promotion of ideas that are contrary to reason, evidence and logic. This, of course, will not promote either reconciliation or the pursuit of truth.

Indigenization and the Creation of Demagoguery

The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) implies that indigenization is consistent with academic freedom. This is because it is perceived to give aboriginal academics the freedom to develop their own “Indigenous knowledge and research traditions” and “challenge established narratives and introduce new epistemologies” (CAUT Bulletin, June 2016, pp. A1, A5).

This argument fails to recognize how it is political pressure, not academic considerations, that is driving indigenization. Indigenization advocates expect that “Indigenous knowledge”, “research traditions”, and “new epistemologies” be welcomed uncritically, and they try to intimidate intellectual challengers with accusations of “racism” and “colonialism.” There are even arguments that the refutation of an indigenous idea constitutes “epistemological racism” or, more astonishingly, “epistemicide.” This bullying has a negative impact on academic

freedom, as it creates an emotional “no-go zone” that is hostile to examining aboriginal issues rationally.

These emotional outbursts are a demagogic strategy to increase the power of indigenization advocates and the resources made available to them. Even perceived innocuous practices are having a negative effect on the capacity of academics to challenge what indigenization advocates are claiming. The political demand that professors recognize that a university sits on the traditional territory of an aboriginal group, for example, is now being taken to mean that non-aboriginal people are “guests” on aboriginal lands and should not say things that are disagreeable to their “hosts.”

The Wishful Thinking and Superstition of “Aboriginal Knowledge Systems”

Censorship is being demanded because the “knowledge” that is being promoted is usually not knowledge, and the suppression of criticism enables this to be hidden. “Aboriginal knowledge” is the beliefs or unsubstantiated opinions of some aboriginal people. And while everyone is entitled to their own beliefs, they are not entitled to their own facts. To be accepted as knowledge, claims about the nature of reality must be supported with verifiable evidence.

This confusion of knowledge with beliefs and unsubstantiated opinions will undermine academic standards. This is already having an impact on a number of areas in the university. Besides anthropology, which already has been seriously undermined by indigenization advocacy, the disciplines of biology, archaeology, and political science are under pressure. Because of political imperatives, the following highly contentious arguments are now being “respected” as “knowledge”:

- 1) Animals present themselves to be killed, and so it is impertinent to abstain from hunting them. Consequently, placing satellite collars on wildlife is ecologically destabilizing, and animals might choose not to offer themselves to be killed in the future (indigenized biology).
- 2) Aboriginal people were created in the Americas and did not migrate from Africa thousands of years ago like all other humans (indigenized archaeology).
- 3) Native kinship groups were nations exercising sovereignty before contact. These relatively peaceful nations embraced the principles of socialism, feminism and environmentalism (indigenized political science).

There is a great deal of evidence that would challenge these claims. Therefore, until the arguments are examined in a rigorous and disinterested fashion, these opinions and spiritually based beliefs cannot be considered “knowledge.” The politicized character of indigenization, however, demands that all aboriginal arguments be “respected.” There should be no attempt to try to refute erroneous aboriginal ideas, indigenization advocates assert, as this would be an obstacle to “dialogue” and “reconciliation.”

Indigenization Creates Deluded Victims

The anthropologist Roger Sandall recognized some time ago that many indigenous people were becoming the “deluded victims of the extravagances of their admirers.” Indigenization, in

fact, is demanding increased admiration for erroneous aboriginal ideas, which is furthering delusional thinking. Of course, forced admiration is not admiration at all; it is condescension. The current problem faced by many aboriginal people is not that their “knowledge” is being “disrespected” in the educational system; it is that aboriginal cultures, because they only recently emerged out of pre-literate and pre-enlightenment conditions, have not yet acquired the understanding necessary to fully participate in modern society. The task, therefore, is to raise the educational levels in aboriginal communities, as well as ensuring that high quality services are made available to all. Educational programs must recognize the challenges of developing scientific methods and critical thinking in the context of cultures still embedded in superstition, undisciplined study habits, and deference to ill-informed elderly “wisdom-keepers.”

Political demands for indigenization hide this reality. Instead of learning how to acquire real knowledge, isolated aboriginal communities are being told that improbable and unsystematic “world views” are a “gift” to humanity. This will increase the number of aboriginal people who can obtain degrees, but it will not improve education. It will also lower the academic standards in universities. Indigenization ensures that many aboriginal professors will be less qualified than their non-aboriginal counterparts, as they will acquire their positions on the basis of their ethnicity and ideology, not excellence in scholarship and teaching.

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