

The many meanings of 'indigenous': lessons from South Africa

【Speaker】 Dr. Rafael VERBUYST

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【Abstract】

The concept 'indigenous' is notoriously ambiguous, especially in Africa. Drawing on ethnographic research in South Africa, I argue that this ambiguity stems from a divide between 'indigenous' and 'non-indigenous' that revolves around three problematic axes: pristineness vs. modernity; prior occupants vs. latecomers; inclusion vs. exclusion. These oppositions have long histories and remain commonplace. They are upheld for a variety of reasons and by a diverse set of actors, including by those who identify as indigenous.

I suggest an alternative analytical framing of 'indigenous' that is not rooted in identity, belonging, or even history. Building on scholarship advocating for a relational understanding of indigeneity, I argue that 'indigenous' should be understood as a contemporary form of marginalization within a specifically settler-colonial constellation. Settler colonialism is the type of structural oppression that ensues when settlers establish permanent settlements beyond their metropole, as happened in South Africa. A settler-colonial lens is not without pitfalls, but it allows us to better appraise the grievances of indigenous activists and nuance the implications for people who arguably do not fit that category. As such, I posit that my framework can reduce the temperature in what are often highly contentious and unproductive debates.

Keywords: indigenous people, settler colonialism, Khoisan, South Africa, ethnicity

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in advance

