INTRODUCTION: RETHINKING THE ‘FRONTIER’ IN AMAZONIA AND SIBERIA: EXTRACTIVE ECONOMIES, INDIGENOUS POLITICS AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS

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The adage that anthropology is comparative if it is anything at all has been tested in recent years to great effect, particularly on the theme of the body (Gregor & Tuzin 2001; Lambeck & Strathern 1998), and with greater confidence than a decade previously (Holy 1987). The body provides a useful starting point for cross-cultural comparison because there can at some level be said to be a common factor: the physically existing, universal human body. While this apparent universality and constancy of the body may be questioned in the light of ethnographic evidence, and the body can be politicised in differing ways, when politics and history themselves are made into the points of comparison a new and somewhat different challenge is set. To compare frontiers, as the theatres in which cultural difference is played out, constitutes a doubly comparative scenario, as each case being compared involves the meeting of social groups and their own mutual comparison as an exploration of mutual similarity and difference. The comparison of frontiers thus involves the comparison of sets of political relationships, as the variable ways in which subjects relate to others.

The authors of the present introduction carried out ethnographic fieldwork in Amazonia and Siberia (Olga Ulturgasheva in Yakutia

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among her own people, the Eveny, and Vanessa Grotti and Marc Brightman in southern Suriname and French Guiana, among the Trio, Wayana and Akuriyo), and our ensuing informal discussions of contemporary political and historical issues persuaded us that many shared aspects of the practical reality of the contemporary social lives of people in both regions would benefit from exploration in a wider arena. We organised a workshop based on the theme of the ‘frontier’ partly because of the way in which this word evokes a sense of contested space and a capitalist ideology of progress, at least in its most often discussed usage, but also because of its more basic, pre-capitalist meaning as the ambiguous margin of a known space, especially a social and political territory. All of these associations contribute towards making ‘frontier’ a highly politicised notion, and we encouraged the conference participants to focus upon how the ‘western frontier’ associated with extractive industry is challenged by indigenous peoples who set up defensive social and sometimes territorial frontiers based on their own interests, often strategically using their own cultural values or those which are attributed to them (Ramos 1994).

In a long history of frontier-centre relations Amazonia and Siberia have been subject to predatory industrial exploitation of a centre. As chair of the final discussion of the workshop, Piers Vitebsky pointed out that ‘the shadow of the frontier is a centre for which “frontier” is a zone of advantage, an opportunity for exploitation. It is the zone of exemption from regulation where the regulations are weaker or slacker’. Ultimately, the notion of ‘going to empty space’ reflects a historical and recurrent process of colonial expansion and resonates with histories of both Amazonia and Siberia. Notions of the timelessness and linearity of civilising processes and the emptiness of their objects continue to drive something resembling a perpetual imperial expansion whose promise of inclusivity is never fulfilled.

Some contributors (Nugent, Argounova-Low) challenge this concept of the frontier on various bases, the most general of which can be summed up as the ‘complexity’ of local realities (Cleary 1993: 341). Certainly, it is clear that it would be untenable to claim the objective existence of a frontier as a real place ‘out there’ in the world; on the other hand it is difficult to deny the importance of the idea of the frontier as a moral construct, an imaginary space which gives rise to real historical events. In this respect it is interesting to consider the frontier ‘symmetrically’ (Latour 1991): besides its associations with ‘Western’ ideologies of progress, the frontier in the sense of the contested edges of the known or the controlled, safe world can be said to exist for any social group. Just as much as frontier industries push forward the boundaries

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of resource exploitation, indigenous politicians seek to establish their own frontiers, albeit often defensive ones, by defining their identity and their relationship with the environment. The contested space that we have in mind is therefore above all a moral one: a frontier can be viewed from at least two sides, and it looks quite different from each, being based upon different cultural assumptions and goals according to the perspective of the beholder.

Natural frontiers, social frontiers; frontiers of nature and society

It is on the level of human experience that the most compelling points of comparison between Amazonia and Siberia lie. Although two human habitats could scarcely differ more starkly in terms of geography and climate, a number of aspects of the social life and recent history of the inhabitants are strikingly similar. Both regions are vast areas of land (Siberia covers about 10 million km\(^2\), and the Amazon rainforest about 7 million km\(^2\)), characterised by low density of population, high mobility (in the form of internal migration) and a ‘shamanic’ relationship between indigenous peoples and the living environment. The reasons for the similar population density (about 3 people per km\(^2\))\(^5\) may not be the same, and instead may in both cases, to differing extents, be due as much to historical circumstances as to adaptation to the environment;\(^6\) indeed, ‘traditional’ livelihoods more commonly include animal husbandry (reindeer herding) and nomadism in Siberia, in contrast with swidden horticulture and semi-nomadism in Amazonia, although hunting and gathering are common to both areas. The relationship between man and the environment in the two regions has nevertheless already been recognised to be comparable by the contributors to a volume on environmental law at a time when national political changes were beginning to make it possible for Siberian indigenous peoples to follow their South American counterparts in engaging in activism and a struggle for the reappropriation of their territories (Bothe et al 1993).

Human relationships with the environment are also emphasised by indigenous perspectives in Amazonia and Siberia. The common feature most often noted in anthropological literature is shamanism —

\(^5\) The OED gives the following reference to Turner’s classic discussion of the frontier: ‘1894 F. J. TURNER Frontier in Amer. Hist. 3 What is the frontier?.. In the census reports it is treated as the margin of that settlement which has a density of two or more to the square mile.’

\(^6\) Amazonia’s population is widely acknowledged to have been reduced to a tenth of its former size, mainly by disease, following the arrival of Europeans (Heckenberger 2005: 144).

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indigenous cosmology in both cases is characterised by forms of 'animism' (Descola 1996, Vitebsky 1995b, Willerslev 2004), where ritual specialists enter into relationships with spirit familiars.7 Because these spirit familiars are manifestations of the living environment – including plants, animals, mountains or rivers – shamanism is fundamental to the relationship between man and the environment in both regions, despite all their geographical differences. But for many years these 'shamanic' populations have been involved with social actors with quite different views of the world, notably those influenced by universalist ideologies such as Stalinism, Latin American corporatism and global capitalism, but also with a myriad of other actors caught somewhere in between the indigenous peoples and the great monoliths of the state and industry. Organisations representing, or claiming to represent, the interests of the indigenous populations have recently become much more profoundly interconnected. Moreover in practice the worldviews of indigenous and capitalist actors (not to mention actors who do not fit into either category) frequently shade into each other through compromise, corruption and long-term interactions of other kinds (see Willerslev and Ulturgasheva, this volume).

Extractive economies

While it may be suggested that there are different kinds of extractivism, and that it exists 'traditional' forms as well, it must be clear that the type of 'extractivism' that is contrasted with native practices here occurs on a large scale, and benefits actors on a scale in direct proportion to their distance from the place of extraction. It is characterised by the extraction of wealth in the form of natural resources, with relatively little long term local investment in return. Extractivist actors thus operate on a supralocal level and, from their metropolitan point of view, they transfer resources from the periphery to the centre (Wallerstein 1974). As Stephen Hugh-Jones observed as chair of the first panel of the workshop, the contemporary issues in both areas are framed by social and ecological concerns raised by, on one hand, the introduction or continuation of extractive economies, and on the other hand an increased global visibility and attention to concerns of indigenous people.

Amazonia is often portrayed as global property because of perceptions in the Western world of its environmental value as the 'lungs of the world' and a centre of biodiversity, although this often

7 Many authors of general works on the subject give prominence to discussions of Amazonian and Siberian shamanism – see for example Eliade 1964.
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irritates Brazilians who regard the region as their own to manage as they see fit; Russia on the other hand jealously guards against outside interference in its own ‘wilderness’, although it too is a focus of global environmental concern. This difference reflects the type of state in each case: only the strong Russian state has the power to prevent foreign interference, while the Amazonian states are relatively weak and contested. Amazonia is consequently a theatre of multi-national activity, as well as being shared between several states, and is thus characterised by greater pluralism on a large scale. In view of this it is ironic that a great deal of the scholarly literature taken to be about ‘Amazonia’ is actually only about Brazil, and makes statements about the region that are not applicable to Bolivian, Colombian, Ecuadorian, French Guianese, Guyanese, Peruvian, Surinamese or Venezuelan Amazonia.

Siberia, meanwhile, as part of Russia (although it would not be out of place to include Mongolia and part of China in this discussion), whose ‘natural’ wealth provides most of the national income, was throughout Soviet history kept in a situation of colonial dependency, and people’s voices were extremely limited in their dealings with the imperial government. As a result, Siberia has for decades been kept and treated as a junkyard for radioactive waste and chemical industry (Nuttal 1998). Indigenous peoples’ activism in local political arenas in response to the extraction of natural resources is an important recent development, which has only taken place since the early 1990s. Another recent development is the emergence of political discourses calling for compensation, for equitable distribution of the revenue from natural resources, for sustainable development and for indigenous peoples’ land rights. Furthermore, in some parts of Siberia contested subsurface assets and revenues from their extractions are deployed as a mobilising symbol in indigenous peoples’ fights for regional autonomy and political decision-making (Wilson, this volume). For example, in her paper in this volume Argounova-Low shows how, in their attempts to gain economic autonomy, the Sakha appropriate the diamond space and transform the emblem of a diamond into a cultural symbol of self-determination. However, there are signs that Russia has ended its post-Glasnost period of opening up to international organisations (businesses, NGOs, etc.), and the state is once again asserting itself with renewed vigour.

People of the Frontier

There are compelling points of comparison to be found in the relationships between local and global, between indigenous peoples and multinational corporations or states in both Amazonia and Siberia, where such relationships are the latest manifestation of a long history of

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enactment of social difference. The people who live ‘in between’ indigenous society and the great monolithic actors are much more numerous than the former’s members, although they enjoy a far lower political profile (Ramos 1998; Wilson, this volume). From their perspective, the ‘frontier’ may not be a frontier at all,\(^8\) especially considering their unusually high mobility and the importance of internal migration within the regions (Cleary 1993). It is most frequently they who do the physical work on sites of industrial extraction or on ‘exploration’ expeditions (see Reig this volume). It is they who teach in local schools, and the boarding schools in French Guiana, Guyana and Russian Far North have existed with the express purpose of transforming indigenous people into state ‘citizens’ like them. They are frequently in control of the means of transport and telecommunications that allow interactions between remote indigenous habitats and the city – notably aeroplanes and short wave radio (Vitebsky 2000, 2005). Finally, as traders they have brought changes to indigenous economies although, despite their material importance, these changes frequently tend to be culturally superficial rather than fundamental, as they are absorbed into indigenous cosmologies (Hugh-Jones 1988), arguably unlike the effects of the changes in habitat which large state and industrial actors can bring about. Meanwhile, indigenous individuals (or groups) frequently take on these same ‘in-between’ roles, for example through their political and economic activities (High, this volume). However, it is clear that national and international policy decisions have a greater impact – often in unintended ways – than any other single influence upon the populations of the frontier (Colchester 1997).

The assumptions and goals of these different categories of actor can be seen as being based upon differing relationships to nature. The stereotypical frontier ideology regards nature as something to be subdued and exploited, and many perceive this as being the worldview of extractive industry. Meanwhile, indigenous politicians frequently portray the peoples they represent as living in harmony with nature, as do many NGOs and some anthropologists, and this affects both how indigenous peoples perceive themselves and how they are viewed by others. These differing worldviews can be said to correspond on a deeper level to the ways in which society and nature are constructed and imagined. Philippe Descola (2005) has suggested a scheme by which four social ontologies can be distinguished as ideal types on the basis of their relationships with the natural world, except that as a challenge to the hegemony of the distinction between nature and culture he proposes

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\(^8\) See contributions by Nugent and Reig, this volume.

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defining these ideal types according to the relationship between ‘interiority’ and ‘physicality’ of different types of actor, whether human or non-human (176). ‘Naturalists’ assume that difference is cultural because the principles of material existence are universal: on this basis extractive capitalists may attempt to ‘persuade’ local actors that it is in their interests to adopt certain relationships to the ‘natural’ world in terms meaningless to their interlocutors. ‘Totemism’ and ‘animism’, which both assume shared interiority, tend to be the ontologies presented as characteristic of indigenous peoples, whether in terms of social and cultural ‘facts’ or as part of political strategies, and this is the basis for the ‘harmony with nature’ in which they can be said to live if we translate these ontologies into ‘naturalist’ terms. Through ideal types such as these we can begin to understand the proliferation of frontiers, moral and physical, that are created and challenged through time. It is on the basis of such differences in the social constitution of the person and other actors that often radically different, competing or intermingled conceptions of property can exist, as the contributors to Hirsch and Strathern (2004) explored through Melanesian case studies, and indeed property is an important theme in these regions where claims to land and resources are so urgently contested.

Indigenous peoples and social transformations

For a long period, culminating in the 20th century, colonial actors actively concentrated the indigenous populations of Siberia and Amazonia into larger settlements and actively suppressed their endogenous belief systems in favour of world religions or political ideologies. This was carried out largely by the state in Siberia, and largely by non-state actors (particularly Christian missionaries) in Amazonia, although here this also frequently took place with state encouragement. New generations have consequently been obliged to balance different forms of expertise and knowledge: those passed on by their families and those required for interaction with encroaching national society.

As a result of the efforts of the indigenous people involved in drafting it, many of whom come from Amazonia and Siberia, the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted by the Human Rights Council in June 2006 and currently on the agenda of the UN General Assembly for full adoption by the United Nations, takes the issues of extractive industries, and the competing worldviews found on the frontier as we have defined it, to the highest legal and political arena. Some anthropologists have portrayed the often simplistic characterisations of identities and ontologies that are represented in the

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declaration as a dangerous threat to the non-indigenous inhabitants of ‘frontier’ zones (Kuper 2003). But the United Nations should not be naively taken as the highest authority in the production of truth; it is instead a political theatre, in which different interest groups compete to serve their interests, often using highly distorting rhetorical strategies to further their aims (Vitebsky 1995a: 197–201).

It is a commonplace of much frontier literature, particularly that of an activist nature, to show how legislative frameworks for clarifying indigenous land and rights on natural resources still remain a subject of controversies and an object of sheer manipulation by those in power, both in Amazonia and Siberia; moreover they are frequently ignored, and are filled with lacunae which are exploited by those who have the requisite knowledge and power. However, as many authors show, from the point of view of local communities situations of apparent domination or exploitation often appear in a very different light (Hugh-Jones 1992; Ssorin-Chaikov 2000; Willerslev, this volume).

Of course reality is far more complicated than the high-flown rhetoric of international politics portrays it: for example, indigenous organisations, while in many cases they genuinely work to establish and uphold the rights of indigenous peoples, often unwittingly serve the state and corporate interest who need representatives with whom they can ‘do business’. Having said this, it is also true that there has been some considerable improvement in recent years from a previous situation in which the state and corporate interests felt no need to consult local indigenous people at all, treating them instead as inconvenient and less than human elements of a hostile natural environment.

Rethinking the Frontier

Amazonia and Siberia have long been frontier zones in the Western imagination, the torrid humidity of the one and the bitter winters of the other causing them to be regarded as incompatible with civilization; they were therefore long treated as depositaries of the rejects of colonial societies, places where criminals or political opponents were sent to die exposed to the harsh environment while incarcerated in the gulag and the bagne.9 Both regions are seen as wildernesses, empty spaces or ‘open spaces’, and have been grouped together as such in fairly recent legal literature (Bothe et al 1993). National societies have invested relatively little in building cities and institutions in either region, attempts at

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'development' have frequently failed in a battle against an environment perceived as hostile (Macmillan 1995), and as a consequence of this both remain places of infamous lawlessness, sometimes romanticised as unexplored spaces of high adventure; however the contributions to this workshop show that this lawlessness is largely the manifestation of the frontier zone itself: the zone of contestation between different worldviews, where the rules and norms of neither apply. This aspect of the frontier recalls its pre-colonial usage as a synonym for the 'marches', the edges of the polity and hence of 'civilized' society. The liminality of such regions is a key theme of certain genres of 'Western' and 'non-Western' literature including Arthurian legend (Anon. 1996) and Chinese stories of the 'outlaws of the marshes' or the 'water margin' (Shi Nai'an 1948).

The ambiguity of and fascination with the margins of society are largely expressed in Amazonian societies through the pervasiveness of affinity, which has been a theme in ethnographic literature of the region for some time (Rivière 1993). The very fabric of society can be seen as being composed of affinal frontiers on a myriad of scales, from the person and the body to society itself and the cosmos (Viveiros de Castro 2001), and affinity's most important feature may be as a dangerous but vital source of social renewal: people must risk engaging with the frontiers of society in order to allow society itself to continue to exist. When put in these terms, such ideas, which have hitherto been portrayed as characteristically Amazonian, can be applied to other regions and cultures in terms of the principle that affinity can be regarded as a social and moral frontier on a variety of levels or scales. This suggests that the idea of the frontier can be constructively used if it is radically rethought. For Raffles, it is 'entirely too obvious' that parts of Amazonia are frontiers, but for him the frontier implies 'linear spatialities, discrete social systems, and the inevitability of incorporation' (2002: 153). Instead, we should begin to think of the frontier in terms of the politicisation of space and, following the lead of recent theories of the body, to see it as multifarious, interactive and perspectively variable.

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10 1413 Pilgr. Soule (Caxton 1483) IV. xxx. 80 To kepe the frontier of the reame fro perille of enemeyes' (OED).

11 See for example Vilaça 1999.

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