

Honor the 4th World: An Alternative to State Domination

Let us stipulate from the very outset that international states own, control and regulate an institution called the United Nations. It is their organization and they can do with it what ever they chose. Fourth World nations are not members of the UN. They sit outside that body. To be a member, as the Palestinians have learned, takes the embrace of the member states. Let us also note that the UN Third Committee accepted the proposal from the State of Bolivia in 2010 to convene the United Nations High-Level Plenary Session of the General Assembly and would call that session of the UN the “World Conference on Indigenous Peoples.” Neither of these facts can be contested.

It is important, as well to stipulate that the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (The World Conference topic) is not “law,” it is a “declaration” of principles and mandates to Member UN governments. Those governments are “encouraged” to “implement all of their obligations as they apply to indigenous peoples under international instruments.” States “may” implement parts or all of a formal declaration, but there is nothing except “encouragement” and binding treaties and protocols adopted by each of the states and nations to make new law.

Will states’ governments come to the table to negotiate with each Fourth World nation? They will not without some “encouragement” and nations must determine what leverage they have to encourage the negotiations. States’ governments are asked to relinquish some of their legal, political and military power to make room for Fourth World nations. They will not give up that power easily. Some nations will use political leverage; some will use economic leverage while others will use their strategic location as leverage. Still other Fourth World nations (Karen [Burma, Thailand], Kurds [Syria, Iraq, Iran, Turkey], Nagas [India], Papuans [Indonesia], Mayans [Mexico/Guatemala], Turaegs [Mali] may use military force. Fourth World leverage will be necessary in any case and that leverage must be developed by each nation. Political engagement is preferable to violent engagement.

The essential political reality is that without leverage, Fourth World nations cannot hope to bring about political change in their status on the basis of good wishes and hopes. Asking states’ governments to be “good to them” is a failed policy that many in the Fourth World continue to hope will bring the rights and protections they want. States—and more accurately the ruling class of states—act in their own political and economic interests. Morality does not play much part in their thinking. The internationally recognized states have what they want from Fourth World nations: their land, resources, and even their people. Realism and history confirm that Fourth World nations must take back what they originally had or at minimum what they need. They must conduct themselves in such a way as to create leverage to “encourage” states’ governments to come to the table to negotiate treaties and other agreements recognizing their political equality.

Fourth World nations have already established independent states such as, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Nauru, Kiribati, Samoa, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. They are among the member states of the United Nations. Inside or outside of the UN, Fourth World nations have distinct political identities and some like the Haudenosaunee persist in their efforts to present themselves to the world as legitimate political nations engaged in the international environment. Seeking political equality with states and other nations is a complicated matter being considered by Scotland, Catalonia, Basque, Tibet, Palestine, Biafra, West Papua and Kurdistan to name a few. Independent statehood is only one option. There are now and can be in the future many other forms

of political status that ensure self-government, but nations must develop and define these political forms.

Steven Newcomb and I sat in a restaurant perhaps 18 months ago and we shared a friendly conversation remembering when we first met at a session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues perhaps a year or two earlier. I gifted Steven with a copy of my book “Indigenous Nations and Modern States” noting that the point of the book is to illustrate the political emergence of Fourth World nations with distinct political identities in relation to the world’s internationally recognized states. As I indicated to Steven then, the content of my book was not theoretical, but a serious effort to document the actual political changes in status Fourth World nations had already achieved in relation to the international state system.

Fourth World nations exercising their recognized and inherent powers of governance participating in democratic dialogue and negotiations can guarantee their position as free human beings. It is not necessary to complain about state domination when the willful initiative of a nation can change the political relationship by whatever means has proved beneficial. The World Conference on Indigenous Peoples is but one opportunity in a greater or smaller way to achieve Fourth World nations’ political goals.

I am confident that Steven Newcomb will agree with me that this is no time to play semantics. The issues require our best thinking and best strategies. I am also fairly confident that Steven will agree with me that it is better for a people to determine their own future by taking their own initiatives and seizing their own opportunities rather than waiting for someone or some government to say: “Now it’s okay.”

That Fourth World nations are slowly emerging to establish their political equality among the world’s peoples there is no doubt. Much has to be learned and understood about how to achieve full self-government, respect for social, economic and cultural rights and establishing political equality between nations and states. Fourth World nations are developing their capacities and they are already changing the global political landscape with what they have learned.

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Source URL: <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2014/08/28/honor-4th-world-alternative-state-domination>