Autochthony

Autochthony is a term derived from the noun autochthon, from the Greek auto (self) and khthon (earth, soil). Thus autochthony characterises everything originating from a given place, or forming there, such as certain species of plants for example. However, more specifically, and in its most current usage, autochthony is a quality to which numerous peoples lay claim in various regions in the world, their common characteristic being that they have generally experienced a situation of colonisation (which is today still applicable in a form know as "inside colonialism") and have undergone a vast process of territorial usurpation, mostly following population settlements. The peoples concerned are in particular the North and South American Indians, different Aboriginal groups in Australia, the Maoris in New Zealand, the Kanak in New Caledonia, the Ainu in Japan or the Inuit in the Arctic.

This geographical diversity runs alongside a degree of diversity in the terms used, since according to the cultural and linguistic context the term autochthonous can be replaced by the synonyms "aboriginal" (present from the origins) or "native" (born in that place). In France the word "autochtone" is by far the most widely used, while in Canada we find the phrase "first nations", giving "peuples premiers" in French. However this designation is not consensual in the English-speaking world, and is mainly used in North America. While in Canada it can be replaced by "aboriginal", in the USA it is "indigenous" that is preferred. This is also the term used in Spanish and Portuguese, giving "pueblos indigenas" (or pueblos originarios in Argentina) in Spanish and "povos indigenas" in Portuguese. It can be noted, finally, that the word "aboriginal" is more often used in Australia, where the reference to "Aboriginal peoples" is equivalent to the notion of autochthonous peoples.

Although the use of the word autochthonous (and of its equivalents) was historically used by the colonisers as a global category to refer to the inhabitants of the territories explored and/or conquered, it is today appropriated by those same inhabitants on the international scene, who use this identity as a political and territorial resource. In recent decades, we have seen a powerful re-emergence of autochthonous issues, characterised by the mobilisation of representatives of numerous peoples calling for the right to self-determination. This right involves language in particular, and the management of natural resources. The mobilisation has generated the adoption of texts such as the ILO (International Labour Organisation) Convention nÂ°169 in 1989, or more recently the United Nations Declaration on the rights of autochthonous peoples in 2007, which establish and recognise a series of fundamental rights for these peoples, among which are rights to [territory](#) (Bellier, 2013).

It can indeed be noted that the mobilisation of the autochthonous component enables the groups taking it up to emphasise their quality as "first inhabitants", or the fact that they preceded the populations forming the different waves of colonisation, often Europeans; it also enables them to legitimise demands for the return of land that has been usurped with the European colonial expansion and the subsequent consolidation of national territories. The link with a given territorial substrate is thus consubstantial with autochthony, which calls at once on notions of ancestry and of spatial justice (Bellier, 2015).

The notion of autochthony, generally viewed as a privileged domain of anthropology, thus takes on a clearly spatial dimension that is the affair of the geographer. Geographers' interest in autochthonous peoples did indeed appear quite early, at the time of the great circumnavigations in the context of exploratory geography (Claval, 2008). The views of geographers on autochthony, however, evolved across the centuries, as did those of anthropologists, who after working extensively on physical anthropology gradually turned their attention to the inexhaustible subjects of borrowings, cross-breeding and recomposed identity. It is in this context that geographical production on the subject of autochthony intensified, from then on structured in a post-colonial approach, on themes that became known as "autochthonous geographies" (Coombes et al, 2012, 2013, 2014). Specific working groups were formed from the end of the 1990s in bodies such as the Institute of Australian Geographers (IAG), the Association of American Geographers (AAG) the Canadian Association of Geographers (CAG) and the Union GÃ©ographique Internationale (UGI).

It can however be noted that it is mainly to the reflections in the area of political geography that autochthony owes its status as a geographical object. In the setting of contemporary territorial [conflicts](#), space is indeed part of a power struggle, which can be seen for instance in the strategic use made by autochthonous peoples of the cartographic tool. There is today a constant process of capture or high-jacking of maps that historically played a fundamental role in the colonising process, enabling the symbolic appropriation of autochthonous territories and the ways in which they were represented. Different autochthonous populations today make use of them, in turn using this tool to serve their territorial demands (Bryan & Wood, 2015).

However autochthonous claims to territory are also based on claims of ontological diversity and vernacular knowledge, postulating a relationship with the world that is different from that based in the West on a fundamental distinction between [nature and culture](#) (Blaser, 2014). In this respect, cultural geography provides autochthonous geographies with working methods and valuable conceptual tools enabling the capture of different, singular conceptions of space. In addition, these tools and methods help in the understanding of multiple, complex territorial re-compositions, for instance the migratory dynamics observed in many autochthonous communities in recent decades. With the considerable demographic pressure, autochthonous lands are less and less able to provide for the elementary needs of the inhabitants, so that large numbers of them migrate, mainly towards the large regional urban areas.

These cities, generally constructed on the basis of a rejection and denial of autochthony in the overseas colonies, thus paradoxically become the new "habitat" of large communities of autochthonous migrants. Although it is not possible to quantify the exact share of the autochthonous populations residing in these cities, it is nevertheless known that they often form a majority – or are likely to become one - within their own society, so that it is increasingly difficult to envisage autochthony outside its relationship with the city. While taking account of autochthonous realities appears to destabilise the foundations of the very notion of autochthony – now taking form in the appearance of diaspora identities – at the same time it provides autochthonous geographies with a very interesting field of research (Peters & Andersen, 2013). In this reconfiguration of contemporary territorialities, individual and collective usage of the city redefines the very substance of autochthonous territories, and autochthony itself.

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