Operationalizing Virtue: How States Approach Indigenous Rights Issues

In this talk, I will propose four cross-cutting themes - unity, national security, development, and reputation - in state narratives and policies often utilized in the context of Indigenous recognition and rights. I will compare the use of these narratives in both settler-colonial and post-colonial states. The first theme - unity - appears to be a catch-all phrase used by states in defense of their powers, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Often used in conjunction with peace, the implication is that a lack of unity would endanger the state, while risking the peaceful life led by its citizens. By pairing unity with peace, state governments seek to legitimize the notion of unity. The second theme is security. Security is frequently invoked when states feel threatened or need a positive framing to justify the dispossession and/or displacement of Indigenous and other communities. With security, like unity, the implication is that the state is prioritizing the safety of its citizens in an effort to maintain peace. Third, I look at development, which implies righteous motives on the part of the state to lift its citizens out of poverty and better their lives, thus justifying the narrative of sacrifice for the greater good. The final theme analyzes state reputation, the costs associated with maintaining and shaping it, as well as its illusory nature. State reputation is especially relevant to the recognition of Indigenous peoples at the international level. All these narratives are meant to make the state appear virtuous, while denying Indigenous rights.

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