

Review Essay

The Resurgent Indian

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AMERICAN INDIAN ETHNIC RENEWAL: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture. By Joane Nagel. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1996.

TO SHOW HEART: Native American Self-Determination and Federal Indian Policy, 1960-1975. By George Pierre Castile. Tucson: University of Arizona Press. 1998

PLAYING INDIAN. By Philip J. Deloria. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 1998.

American Indian ethnicity is the most complex ethnic formation in the United States. Indians are in some respects and in some places the most spatially, socially, and institutionally isolated of America's ethnic minority groups. For example, Indians—especially reservation Indians—lag African Americans on most socio-economic indicators. Indians remain the most non-metropolitan of all large American ethnic populations, and many reservation Indians are spatially isolated from non-Indian settlement areas. Some Indians are institutionally segregated as well: many Indians receive health, social, educational, and governmental services from agencies of their tribe rather than from the state and local governments that serve other Americans. On the other hand, however, the ethnic boundary between American Indians and non-Indian Americans is typically

porous in those places where Indians and non-Indians do interact. The clearest evidence of this is the frequency with which Indians and non-Indians inter-marry. By 1990 a majority of married American Indians were married to Whites, and a majority of American Indian children also had a non-Indian parent.

The contradictions of American Indian ethnicity have increased in the second half of the twentieth century. The social, economic, and cultural differences between American Indians and non-Indians narrowed after World War II. At the same time, the symbolic and political expression of American Indian ethnicity flourished. Many persons with mixed Indian and non-Indian ancestry came to express a sense of affiliation with the Indian aspect of their heritage. Indian tribes claimed their treaty rights more aggressively. There has been an explosion of the public expression of Indian ethnicity in activities ranging from the political activism of the American Indian Movement to a revived interest in language, traditional dancing, and other indigenous cultural forms.

The interpretation of American Indian ethnic renewal has preoccupied many scholars as well as lay people for decades. There are a number of reasons for this. Perhaps the most important are symbolic. That Native communities are recognized by the United States government as nations-within-a-nation makes them unique among American ethnic populations—the only exception to a generally rigid American refusal to recognize the corporate existence of ethnic sub-nations within the national borders of the United States. The record of expropriation and extermination of Native populations in the United States is one of the recognized stains that American nationalist myth makers must confront; the persistence and recognition of native communities may help to assuage some of the guilt. Then too, as many Americans try to develop a sense of their national community as fundamentally plural, the apparently successful persistence—and now resurgence—of Indian communities lends inspiration to the idea of pluralism itself. This is all the more the case because the long-standing ambivalence of White relations with Indians makes this ethnic boundary more likely fodder for a myth of beneficent pluralism than the starker antagonism between Whites and Blacks throughout United States history. For those whose interest runs more to the analytic than the symbolic, it is also true that in the American experience the persistence of some form of Native ethnicity more than five centuries after Columbus's landfall is an instructive anomaly both in fact and form. There is no other ethnic distinction quite like this one in the United States.

Joane Nagel's *American Indian Ethnic Renewal* is the most ambitious recent scholarly analysis of American Indian ethnicity in this period of its post-war resurgence. Nagel uses the Indian case in order to explore general theories of ethnic process. In particular, she criticizes conventional functionalist and class models of ethnic process that emphasize the structural isolation of ethnic populations as the essential ground of ethnic sentiment. Nagel argues that these older models cannot make sense of the renewal of Indian ethnicity at just the time

that structural differences between Indian and non-Indian populations narrowed. She adopts instead a social construction model of ethnic processes that “stresses the fluid and situational, volitional, and dynamic character of ethnic identification, organization and action” (p. 19).

Why was there a resurgence of American Indian ethnicity in the post-war period? Nagel points to several causes and conditions. The predisposing conditions included a cultural climate that became increasingly friendly to ethnic mobilization, the demonstration effect of the civil rights movement, federal Indian policies that unintentionally fostered supra-tribal consciousness and contact, and increased federal funding targeted on the needs of Indians. Both the symbolic and material benefits of Indian identity were increasing at the same time that an institutional nexus was forming that facilitated ethnic mobilization across the historically primary boundaries between specific tribal communities. The pivotal element of the renewal, in Nagel’s telling, is the emergence of “Red Power” activism, embodied in social movement organizations like the American Indian Movement (AIM). The influence of the movement extended beyond its own political accomplishments—which may have been relatively narrow—to the diffusion of a new attitude of ethnic pride among American Indian people.

Part of the interest—and also part of the difficulty—with Nagel’s analysis of the Indian ethnic renewal is precisely that the resurgent ethnicity that she describes departs from conventional expectations about both the form and effect of ethnicity. That contemporary Native ethnicity doesn’t fit the classic models is clear. But what does this mean? Does it imply, as Nagel would have it, that contemporary ethnicity breaks out of the bounds of conventional ethnic models? Does it mean instead that Indian ethnicity has been overwhelmed by social, institutional, and symbolic processes that have little to do with ethnicity as this has historically been understood?

One thing that is striking in Nagel’s account is the diversity of people, events, and institutions that are subsumed under the symbol of Indian identity. Though at various points Nagel talks about the renewal as a reinvigoration of Indian ethnic boundaries, the very idea of an ethnic boundary becomes elusive. As the final chapter in the book discusses, the current American Indian scene is marked with continuing controversy about the authenticity of some of the extraordinarily diverse claims and expressions of Indian identity. The authenticity debate largely takes place among people who define themselves as Indians. Is there any meaningful sense in which this diversity comes together to form a common ethnic object?

For example, one part of the renewal is the increasing effectiveness and assertiveness of institutions of tribal government. But to what extent does the reinvigoration of tribal polities have to do with anything recognizably related to the strengthening and renewal of ethnic communities? This transformation occurred as one part of a more general expansion and bureaucratization of the federal government in the post-war period. Once tribes survived the threat of the

termination of their federal recognition in the 1960s, their further course owes little to any logic of ethnic process. As tribes rode the wave of federal expansion, organized Indian tribes have become no longer simply ethnic communities, but rather an entrenched component of the American federal system. The fortunes of these institutions should be expected to rise and fall according to the logic of political and institutional processes, rather than any specific logic governing ethnic cohesion or its corrosion.

It might seem as if the expressive side of the Indian ethnic renewal is what makes it truly a renewal of ethnicity and ethnic community. If this is the case, the strengthening of tribal institutions may be one part of the explanation of the renewal, rather than an example of its effects. To some extent, this is what Nagel seems to be saying. But questions remain open even about the expressive side of the renewal. What is specifically ethnic about resurgent American Indian ethnicity is also a bit uncertain.

If Indian identity has surged in recent decades, so have many other forms of identity. Many commentators have pointed out that the United States—in common with many other modern national communities—has become increasingly an identity society. The life work of we (post)moderns has come to include the important tasks of selecting and expressing identities that declare both our corporate affiliations and our individuality. Ethnicity is one of the recognized idioms of this identity work, along with, for example, religious affiliation, gender, occupational identity, political loyalties, leisure activity, and lifestyle. In this circumstance it may not be surprising that the potentially potent symbol of indigenous identity has come to be used more often.

Perhaps the important questions about the expressive side of the Indian ethnic renewal concern its effects. Twenty years ago, Herbert Gans introduced the concept of “symbolic ethnicity” to describe ethnicity that is volitional, and that has little effect on behavior, and less on life chances. How much of renewed Indian ethnicity is symbolic ethnicity in this sense? The import of the question is that it leads us to ask whether there is not some reason to retain elements from conventional theories of ethnic process that emphasize the structured difference between ethnic populations as a component of our definition of the concept of ethnicity. To some extent, the assertion of a connection between ethnic structure and ethnic sentiment may not be so much a falsifiable empirical claim as it is a statement of what is important to the researcher about ethnicity, namely how it structures behavior and regulates access to opportunities. Thus, the questions that might be posed about the Indian ethnic renewal are whether and how it has the kind of consequences that are recognized in the conventional models that Nagel rejects.

George Pierre Castile paints in one part of Nagel’s large canvas in much greater detail in *To Show Heart. Native American Self-Determination and Federal Indian Policy, 1960-1975*. In most respects, Castile tells a story which is

complementary to and compatible with Nagel's. His topic is narrower—he is explaining shifts in federal policy, rather than the consequences of these shifts for Indians. Castile's account corroborates Nagel's more general synthetic treatment in its emphasis on the exogeneity of both federal Indian policies and the broader cultural currents that give rise to principles of ethnic self-determination.

Castile emphasizes the role of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) in transforming federal Indian policy. From one point of view, the OEO made relatively little difference. It did not have the resources to end much poverty on Indian reservations or elsewhere. However, Castile argues, it did let loose the idea of tribal self-determination. This idea would transform federal Indian policy.

The OEO famously emphasized the *maximum feasible participation* of powerless groups in programs designed for their benefit. In the conventional analysis, the policy of maximum feasible participation was a disastrous failure in urban and non-Indian settings, where it often undercut the established Democratic party coalitions whose support was essential to the success of OEO initiatives. In the case of reservation Indians, however, maximum feasible participation implied putting resources directly in the hands of tribal leaders. What the OEO bypassed in the case of Indians was a long-standing institutional focus of federal Indian policy on the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). The idea of direct tribal control that was initiated by the OEO would have far reaching consequences. Castile is not a polemical BIA-basher, but evidently shares the now common sense that the emergent policy of tribal self-determination is a better way to organize federal-tribal relations than a system that fostered tribal dependency on a Washington-based bureaucracy.

The idea of tribal self-determination progressed in the decade between the establishment of the OEO in 1965 and the enactment of the Indian Self-determination Act in 1975. The eventual success of the idea of self-determination arose through a confluence of factors. One of these was the growing empowerment and activism of tribal leaders as they grew used to exercising a leadership role. A second factor was the progression of American cultural ideals emphasizing civil rights and racial equality, which created broad support for tribal rights in the American electorate. A third factor was the advent of the Nixon administration, which was friendly to Indian self-determination for several reasons: Nixon's personal empathy for Indians, the compatibility of the goal of tribal self-determination with Nixon's federal revenue sharing policies, and the administration's belief that an Indian-friendly policy would outflank the Democrats on a visible minority rights issue. The chief barrier to the full federal embrace of self-determination was a Democratic congress that included several key players who remained committed to a terminationist agenda for Indian policy into the early 1970s.

Where Nagel had emphasized the mediating role of Indian activism in fostering American Indian renewal, Castile downplays the role of this activism in changing the course of federal Indian policy. He does emphasize that tribal

leaders and other Indian individuals came to have a progressively important role in shaping Indian policy throughout the 1960s and 1970s. By contrast, he dismisses the importance of the “media chiefs” and the high profile made-for-television events that they engineered such as the seizure of Alcatraz, the Interior building, and Wounded Knee. Castile declares emphatically that the real work of expanding tribal autonomy was progressing independently of these events through the behind-the-scenes politics that he chronicles.

Nonetheless, the points of agreement between the stories told by Nagel and Castile outweigh their differences in emphasis. Both scholars agree that the cultural currents let loose by the civil rights movement both inside Indian communities and in American society more generally were important causes of the changes wrought in relations between Indians and non-Indian American society. Both attribute broad causal significance to shifts in the institutional structuring of federal-tribal relations. Both trace a dialectal process by which shifts in federal policy promote Indian assertiveness and organization, which in turn put pressure on the federal government to proceed further down the path of tribal self-determination.

Just as Castile fleshes out the story of the politics of federal Indian policy, Philip J. Deloria sheds significant new light on the changing cultural constructions of Indian identity in *Playing Indian*. The cultural materials of the Indian ethnic resurgence were not created *de novo* in the current era. Rather, current perceptions and experiences of Indian identity are part of an evolving sequence of understandings of what the identity means. Deloria’s fascinating study traces that sequence from a fresh angle. His subject is not in the first instance either Indian identity or Indian-White relations. Rather, as the title suggests, it is a history of the ways in which European Americans have adopted Indian identity for themselves.

As Deloria shows, White Americans have been playing Indian since before the founding of the nation. In the colonial period, Indian play was grafted onto imported Euro-American traditions of carnivals of misrule. The tradition was cemented in the Revolution—most famously in the Boston Tea Party, in which rebellious colonists dressed up as Mohawks to dump dutied tea into Boston Harbor. In the nineteenth century, White Indian play continued both as a symbolic adjunct to civil disobedience, but also in the emergence of fraternal societies such as Order of the Redmen and the Improved Order of the Redmen. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Boy Scout movement adapted Indian play from the fraternal societies. The Boy Scouts’ use of Indian play in turn influenced the rise of Indian hobbyism in the post-war period. In hobbyism, the White Indian player became a connoisseur of some aspect of Indian culture. Indian play also figured into the counterculture and new age movements in the 1960s and thereafter. In these movements, Whites claimed some essential continuity between cultural practices presumed to have roots in Indian traditions, and the behavior and values of the White identity movement.

As the variety of forms of White Indian play suggest, the purposes and content of the Indian role have often shifted. Indeed, the malleability of the symbol of Indian identity may be one of its central attractions to White Americans. Deloria suggests that the key to understanding White Indian play is that it held several dualities in tension: the Indian player is at once Indian and not Indian. Indians are both interior and exterior to American society. The Indian is savage and noble. The Indian is rooted in an ancient, authentic and American community, and is at the same time free from the artificial conventions of modern American society. By playing Indian, the White Indian expresses his—most Indian players have been male—own American-ness, authenticity, and freedom. Mostly, he has been able to do so while filling up the vessel of Indian identity with whatever content he chooses, because of the historical imbalance in power relations between White Americans and American Indians.

Mostly, but not completely. Indians themselves are at the margins of Deloria's story as they have mostly been on the periphery of White Indian play. But, after all, it matters quite a bit to both Indians and Whites that Whites play Indian while Indians continue to be present. Indians could and sometimes did affect the content of White Indian play, because the behavior of real live Indians could affect the meaning of Indian-ness. For example, it is hard to play the Indian as a noble when by your lights Indians act as savages on the present scene. White Indian play also affected the way that Whites treated Indians. Deloria argues, for example, that White Indian play made truly genocidal policies impossible, because it is hard to see yourself as an Indian while exterminating real ones. On the other hand, the tradition of White Indian play encouraged policies of Indian removal to distant places where the conditions of the real Indian would pose less of a threat to the imagination of the White Indian. It also encouraged the propagation of the myth of the vanishing Indian, and of the bequeathing of American identity from the Indian to the European American.

Among the most promising insights in Deloria's volume concern the implications of White Indian play for *Indian* identity. White Indian play created a context for Indian behavior. The imbalance in power limited Indian choices about how they would respond. Deloria describes how Indians Charles Eastman, Ella Deloria, and Seneca Parker responded to the context created by White conceptions of the Indian in part by mimicking the White Indian players' version of the Indian, attempting to draw what symbolic power they could by behaving in ways that Whites had taught themselves to expect from Indians. The result, Deloria says, was increasing ambiguity about who Indian people are. Can Indians lay claim to their own identity only by dressing and acting in the ways that are culturally cognizable within the framework of White Indian play? The answer appears, in part, to be yes.

My one disappointment with Deloria's analysis is that he did not say more about the implication of White Indian play for the Indian ethnic resurgence. He does document the dramatic turn that White Indian play takes in the post-war

period: the rise of serious Indian hobbyism, the increasing turn to Indian identity to ground personal quests for authenticity in the face of the tribulations of modernity, the appropriation of Indian identity by the counterculture and new age movements in willful disregard of the Indians' own views of these movements. However, Deloria gives relatively little attention to the obvious question that arises about whether there is much analytical difference between the way that Whites play Indian and the way that Indians play Indian. In other words, how much and what parts of the Indian ethnic renewal that Nagel describes came about because Indians began using the same scripts as White Indian players, and for the same reasons?

The arrival of each of these three books from representatives of three different academic disciplines—sociology, anthropology, and history—testifies to the current vitality of American Indian studies. The American Indian case remains both an analytically intriguing exemplar of contemporary ethnic processes, and a resonant symbol of the idea of ethnic community. These three books make a compelling case that understanding American Indian ethnicity opens important windows on both modern ethnicity and American identity and institutions.