10-1-2000

Joane Nagel *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture*

Thomas D. Hall

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Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol43/iss43/6
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American Indian Ethnic Renewal:
Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture
New York: Oxford University Press, 1966

What does contemporary Native American political action have to do with civilizations? Nothing and everything. If one takes a traditional (whatever that may be) view of Native Americans, or all nonstate societies for that matter, they are not part of civilizations. If, however, one examines how civilizations interact with nonstate societies (as I did in Comparative Civilizations Review No. 39) then there is a great deal of relevance. Finally, if one wants to explore how a civilization thinks about itself, one useful way is to see how it treats those it views as non- or marginal members. It is in these latter two senses I wish to review Joane Nagel’s book on Native American politics.

The book centers on one central puzzle: how is it that between 1970 and 1980, and again between 1980 and 1990 the number of American Indians counted in the U.S. Census increases faster than the known rates of biological increase of those identified as American Indians in 1970? A first guess might be counting errors. While these did, and do continue to happen, they are not the major factor. One might then guess misclassification, such as East Indians being counted as Native Americans. This, too, occurs, but not in large numbers. One can posit other possibilities, but the key answer, which Nagel documents quite well, is that a number of Americans changed their racial and ethnic identity to Native American during these decades.

The puzzle is why? This puzzle is even more perplexing when one considers the various ethnic and racial hierarchies in the United States that generally rank non-white, non-male, non-Protestant individuals lower than male WASPs [White Anglo-Saxon Protestants]. Nagel’s argument is that after the occupation of Alcatraz in 1969 by Indians of All Nations, American Indian activism, spear-pointed by the American Indian Movement (AIM), drastically changed the identity politics for individuals of Native American ancestry. The net effect was that many who had
passed as white repassed back to American Indian. It is this "repassing" that explains the dramatic increase in the census numbers. Anyone with even passing familiarity of census taking and ethnic identity can think of a number of problems with such an assertion. This is precisely why the argument takes a book and not an article or a research note to make.

Readers of Comparative Civilizations Review may want to reflect on how the various processes described by Nagel differ from — or parallel — those in ancient civilization which also absorbed large numbers of nonstate peoples during their histories. Also relevant is what these late twentieth political movements show about the workings of modern civilizations. With these issues in mind, I turn to an account of the book.

American Indian Ethnic Renewal is organized in three parts of three chapters each. The book begins with a preface in which Nagel explains how as a graduate student at Stanford when Alcatraz was occupied she became interested in Native Americans and became intensely aware of the situational dimensions of ethnic identity. A brief note on terminology clarifies how Nagel uses terms that have multiple meanings. The front matter finishes with an introduction that reviews social science approaches to the study of Native Americans, how these relate to the general study of race and ethnicity, and the concept of ethnic renewal, a form of ethnogenesis in which new ethnic groups and/or identities are built, or rebuilt from past and existing identities.

With these basics sketched, Part I examines the construction of ethnic identity, culture, and their deconstruction. Together they constitute an excellent review of social science literature on ethnicity and culture. Nagel reviews and dismisses the primordialist view of ethnicity and explores the situational, or social-construction approaches to ethnicity. While at times an individual may choose her/his identity rationally from an available portfolio of identities, identities are often imposed by a dominant political power. Bases of rational choices can be access to resources, political access to the state (e.g., through voting rights), or as a means of competing with other groups. Chief among the nonrational (note well, non rational, not irrational) are
symbolic uses many of which revolve around the emotional satisfactions of group membership. These latter can, at times, be more important than the rational choices.

Among other things, these [re]constructed identities become a basis of cultural and ethnic solidarity, and build a sense of community. This in turn reinforces local norms, values, practices, and institutions. At the same time these choices can have other eminently practical and economic consequences. Nagel cites the role of archaeologists and anthropologists in the rebirth of Southwest Indian arts, including pottery styles, rug weaving, and sandpainting, all geared toward the tourist market. This, however, can become a trap as tourists may want, and even demand, "traditional" craft forms when artists want to move on to newer forms and styles.

Such challenges themselves are part of the politics of changing ethnic identities and cultures. Nagel notes that demand for an unchanging "tradition" can be almost as threatening as attempts to destroy it. Neither approach allows the culture to change on its own terms. This helps us see why such contested identities are so problematic, and so fiercely debated. Native activism is counter hegemonic. "Nevertheless, the reality is that the United States (or Canada or New Zealand or India or Nigeria) is the arena in which these debates and challenges occur and in which these battles must be won" (pg. 71). In short these debates tell us not only much about what it means to be Native American, but by implication what it means to be American.

The next three chapters examine the roles of population change, politics, and ethnicity in the resurgence of Indian identity. The first of these dissects carefully the ways in which identity and individuals have been counted in the U. S. Census and other sources. Here Nagel establishes beyond any reasonable doubt that this puzzle of changing ethnic/racial identities is genuine. The next chapter examines how American policy which promoted assimilation actually backfired. It created an educated, articulate group of American Indians who voiced demands for continued distinctiveness. She also notes that this was part of larger social processes within the United States which included
the Civil Rights movement and the rise of Black Power. Similarly, it was part of a larger global awareness of how racism at home in the U.S. undermined its positions abroad, and how that same racism fueled some of America’s foreign policy. It is not insignificant that a large number and very high percentages of Native Americans served in World War II, Korea, and especially Vietnam, and in the latter were disproportionately in combat units. The final chapter of this part traces the history of American Indian activism, noting how it rose and fell with various other social processes, but underwent a major shift after the occupation of Alcatraz. Most importantly, participation in protest activities became a means for urbanized Indians to assert their American Indian identity. Many individuals went through complex, and wrenching, processes of learning who they were and where they were from, and reconnecting with their roots.

The final three chapters examine the legacies of these changes. Activism brought together “traditional” and new Indians in a variety of ways. One discovery was the extreme difference between various Indian religiosities and those of mainstream Christians [and members of other world religions]. Many individual Indians had taken on a protective veil of outward assimilation to world religions and had kept traditional practices secret. With the resurgence of American Indian identities, many individuals publicly reasserted their traditional religiosity. Others began to search for what had been lost. These changes gave a particularly activist role to “cultural technicians” such as anthropologists who had recorded traditional practices on paper, tape, and film as various individuals tried to restore these long dormant practices. This process illustrates how the past itself can be a resource for social action, and how social movements simultaneously reflect and create culture.

The penultimate chapter explores how the pressure generated by activism pushed federal policy from termination toward self-determination. That is, the federal government largely abandoned its policy goals of pressuring Indians to give up their distinct identities and their special treaty rights in order to meld into the general population. New policies gave Indians a freer hand in
determining their own futures. Thus, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) began to contract with tribal governments to run reservation schools themselves. Within the BIA American Indians replaced white bureaucrats. The tribal college movement began with the founding of Navajo Community College, and has blossomed into over 30 tribal colleges by 1999. Ironically, conservative Republicans such as Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan oversaw this policy shift. This unusual alliance derived from Republican desires to gain or keep access to Indian resources and the needs of tribal governments to gain center stage from the various national Indian organizations that had sprung up in the activist years. In the eyes of many conservative Republicans, individual tribal governments were easier to manipulate than national movements. Thus, a strong effort to repress national organization such American Indian Movement (AIM) accompanied this policy shift.

Anyone reading the news in the late 1990s knows that these struggles are far from over. But they have moved, for the most part, from the streets into the courts. Today, issues focus on gaming, whale hunts, fishing rights, avoidance of local taxes, and so on. While American Indians have more autonomy than they have had since Europeans invaded in large numbers several centuries ago, they do not have a completely free reign over their own affairs. These rapidly changing political circumstances are both the result of activism and the creators of a renewed set of American Indian identities.

In dissecting these processes, Nagel does much more than analyze the complex history of Indian–White relations. She also illustrates the many ways groups, nations, and I would argue civilizations, incessantly reconstruct their identities, both collectively and individually. In this she provides a useful model of how to investigate changing identity politics. This also raises questions about how analogous processes might have proceeded differently in other civilizations in other places and at other times. It is not enough to assert that each era has its own zeitgeist, or to argue that each civilization has its own weltanschauung; we must examine how each is built, how it is maintained, how it changes,
and how it disappears. A formidable task to be sure. Such exam-
inations, however, may provide a means for bridging the chasm
between materialists, Marxists, or world-systemites on the one
hand and ideationalists, such as followers of Toynbee or Sorokin,
and many other civilizationists on the other hand.

Thomas D. Hall