David W Fletcher, March 2006

JOANE NAGLE'S *AMERICAN INDIAN ETHNIC RENEWAL: RED POWER AND THE RESURGENCE OF IDENTITY AND CULTURE*

In *American Indian Ethnic Renewal*,[1] Joane Nagel, Professor of Sociology at the University of Kansas, offers a theoretical model for assessing modern conceptions of Native American ethnicity. Her model relies on the Red Power movement's impact on Indian communities in the 1960s and 1970s and its residual effects during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Fully grounded in Max Weber's and Fredrik Barth's ideas of culture and ethnicity, Nagel's work assumes that, like all other concepts of ethnicity, "Indian ethnic boundaries and identities are continually socially constructed and negotiated" (9). She believes that "transformations of identity and culture that mark late twentieth-century American Indian ethnicity were forged in the crucible of Red Power" and "Red Power activism was the progenitor of an American Indian ethnic rebirth" (113). This assessment is based on the premise that "cultural renewal–the reconstruction of old cultural forms and the construction of new traditions–is a crucial part of individual and collective ethnic renewal" (190). While an interesting overview and summary of the current situation with respect to Native American renewal and general conceptualizations of modern Indian ethnicity, the data she offers reveal nothing new, and the connections she makes produce no compelling revelation.

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[1] *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), 298 pages with preface, introduction, ten tables, four figures, endnotes, references, and index.

Nagel proceeds from her "general model of ethnic renewal" (Part I), to analysis of Indian population growth, Indian politics, and the Red Power movement (Part II), then to "legacies of Red Power: cultural renewal and political reform" (Part III). Her goal is to "document and account for [the] great resurgence in American Indian ethnicity" and "show through census data, interviews, and the statements and analyses of many native and non-native observers and researchers that Red Power was the catalyst that sparked American Indian ethnic renewal" (12-13). Her model of ethnic identity construction (chpt. 1), culture construction (chpt. 2), and ethnicity deconstruction (chpt. 3) borrows heavily from postmodern dialectic philosophy used by the transactional school of Fredrik Barth, the famous Norwegian anthropologist, who popularized a relational view of ethnicity in his work *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969). Steeped in theory, her Part I hardly touches on Native American concerns in earnest. Surprisingly, though, Nagel asserts, apparently in contradiction to her relational model, the "primordiality and the fixedness of American Indian ethnicity." She bases this on observations that, in this reviewer's mind, resurrect old stereotypes about "indigenous cultures . . . [and] nonwhites . . . [who are] viewed as biologically distinct." She adduces the "complex legal history" of "Indian ethnic distinctiveness in the United States" via "treaties, administrative actions, executive orders, and congressional acts" that assign Indian groups "unique political status" (33). But it is hard to know why "primitiveness" and external perception (i.e., the official federal government view) figure to be an important determinative of modern Indian ethnicity based on her relational model. Too, the assumption that "myths of cultural continuity and purity" have imbedded within them

"seeds of doubt and delegitimation" (72) simply begs the issue and puts doubt and negativity to the forefront of cultural formation.

Better is Nagel's descriptive sections where she lays theory aside and presents the data in a more straightforward fashion (Part II). Of course, statistical assessments can be tricky, and Nagel uses the appropriate qualifying language in her analysis of native population growth (i.e., "nuances of interest and definition," "flexibility," "difficult to determine," "partly the result," 85, 91, 93, 104). Rightly, she judges "the puzzle of an increasing American Indian population cannot be solved using the usual set of demographic explanatory tools" (113). It may be questioned, too, whether she solves the puzzle of population growth and ethnic resurgence among natives with her postulate of Red Power activism as "progenitor of an American Indian ethnic rebirth." Certainly the Red Power movement resulted in giving natives political and socioeconomic structures whereby growth could be sustained over a period of time. Herein lies the value of Nagel's work. As she suggests, "The solution to the puzzle of increased rates of American Indian ethnic identification . . . can be found in the simple fact of the changing material and symbolic worth and meaning of American Indian ethnicity" (140). She clearly shows that this occurred by: (1) increased funding to federal Indian programs; (2) politics in the 1960s and 1970s that supported minority concerns and status; and (3) federal assimilation and urbanization policies that enabled native activism (140-141). These initiatives, mainly by the federal government, inadvertently helped Indians reforge their native identity and culture through what came to be known as Red Power during the Civil Rights decades (chpt. 6).

But why did native culture go through another period of decadence and renewal in the 1980s and 1990s, if sparked and sustained by Red Power? A simple linear model will not do, and Nagel is forced to go back to her sociological models. No doubt, syncretism or cultural blending has been at work in the "construction" and "reconstruction" of Pan-Indian culture. But it is not satisfying, in this reviewer's opinion, to see Red Power activism, as "a dialectic between culture and action" (204), solely at work in the reformation of modern Indian ethnicity (chpt. 7). Nor does her appeal to policies of termination and self-determination solve the problem (chpt. 8). In adducing this connection, Nagel skates on thin ice. To argue "the timing of the Red Power movement corresponded to a reversal of more than two decades of federal Indian 'termination' policy in favor of Indian self-determination and the reaffirmation of tribal rights and sovereignty" (228) simply fails to answer the question. By arguing this, Nagel gives up her theory of ethnicity as relational and evolving, although to her credit she does hint at the complexity of the matter in her last appraisal (chpt. 9). As she knows, the issue is much more complicated and needs more detailed analysis. Tribal distinctions and new and recent government policies (both state and federal) need to be explored in depth. *American Indian Ethnic Renewal* is an interesting overview of one facet of Indian ethnic identity and its formation–the rise of Red Power and the questions that the movement generated. But the link is an obvious one, so it will be left to other scholars to elucidate the matter further.

Book Reviews:

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