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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Interpreting Indigenous Complexity

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This wonderful book is deeply researched, conceptually clarifying, and beautifully written. When read together, its chapters produce a powerful image of the alternative political possibilities outlined by North American Indigenous writers including Zitkala-Ša, Ella Deloria, Vine Deloria Jr., George Manuel, Lee Maracle, and Howard Adams. Temin has done his intellectual work well: I came to the book with extensive knowledge of some of the figures it covers, and little knowledge of others, and came away able to think much more deeply about all involved. This is a first-rate scholarly effort.

I raise some questions that reflect broader quandaries about how to do political theory, particularly when the arguments of less-familiar figures are involved. How should we deal with figures who are intellectually appealing in many ways, but whose positions are uncomfortable in others? To what degree should we foreground only the former elements rather than the latter? What are the intellectual and social risks we undertake when choosing one way or another?

There is a category of historical storytelling referred to as "Whig history," in which past events are narrated to culminate naturally in a glorious present. Political theorists are not much prone to this style of narration anymore. There is, however, a corresponding pattern in political theory that we might describe a Whig history of political resistance. In this style of narration, one draws together multiple figures from the past to show how a clear trajectory exists in their thought pointing toward an appealing alternative to existing arrangements. Temin's book draws this kind of political trajectory well, showing shared themes across Indigenous thinkers that culminate in a vision of deeply interdependent communities shaped by relations of reciprocity, which stretch to non-humans as well. It is a deeply anti-capitalist vision, in Temin's narration. Temin describes this vision within the language of earthmaking, and argues plausibly that we should use this concept much more deeply in our political thinking.

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The danger of building such clarity out of complicated historical figures, however, is that it usually leaves aside much of what they had to say, particularly when it fits awkwardly with what we want them to have said. I focus on Temin's discussion of Ella Cara Deloria, who outlines some of the key relational elements that shape Temin's earthmaking concept. As described by Temin, Deloria was deeply alive to the inherently interdependent nature of human life, and focused on showing non-Indigenous readers the degree to which their own lives failed to realize this. As Temin outlines, those who fail to see such interdependence fall into arrogant and destructive attitudes toward others. They are likely to be brutalizing colonizers. Centering interdependence allows us to move beyond solipsistic ideas of sovereignty of both state and person, toward more humane visions of how we can live together in civilized peace.

Deloria draws this vision from her understanding of traditional Dakota thought and practice, which she describes using many of the anthropological tools developed during a long association with Franz Boas, often going beyond Boas's limited horizons when doing so. Deloria was unquestionably brilliant as a thinker and writer, often producing vivid images of Dakota social forms and the brutalization they have suffered by encroaching colonial society. Temin highlights strengths and appeal of Deloria's work well in his account, drawing much from it that political theorists should think and read more about.

But Deloria's writing did not always fit well with modern-day sentiments about where Indigenous arguments should go. Though Deloria drew on Dakota traditions throughout her research and political writing, many elements of her most directly political work, *Speaking of Indians*, describe a need for fundamental changes to pre-colonial Dakota lifeways. Seemingly without irony, for example, she argues that the reduction of former Dakota landholdings was normatively required by population asymmetries: "A relatively small group of mankind could not rightly refuse to share their vast rich domain with others; they could not rightly prevent its exploitation for the good of the many."[1] Deloria adds that she believes all Dakotas would agree with this if it were correctly described to them, so that this change is said to be justified on Dakota terms themselves. What should a contemporary political theorist do with a claim of this kind? Should it be set aside as politically awkward in the present day, or highlighted as an illustration of Deloria's commitment to relationality and reciprocity? Or should one instead interpret it as a strategic claim made for her particular audience, and therefore not indicative of her real viewpoint?

This is far from the only place in which *Speaking of Indians* outlines now-uncomfortable positions. Deloria argues that Indian tribes should have been put on a clear path to American citizenship early, so that they could have begun reshaping their behaviors more quickly and decisively:

> They should have been told over and over and over: "On such and such a date you have to assume your places as American citizens. You can't live like this forever. But, unless you prepare, you will still have a bad time of it

[1] Ella Deloria, *Speaking of Indians* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 79.

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> when the day comes. So, *if you love your children*, get ready, and get them ready too."[2]

Deloria frames the final line as relating directly to the Dakota focus on relationality and one's duties as a relative. As an adult member of a Dakota community, one has an obligation to prepare the next generation for living well, and Deloria sought to leverage that directly in her argument for structured social change. Roughly, she suggests that Dakotas would have seen the value of Americanization if it had been simply put to them in the right way.

This pattern appears even more starkly in her argument for reinterpreting Dakota patterns of economic reciprocity for a new age. This reinterpretation suggested deep and guided forms of social change, in which individual economic self-help became understood as the best modern interpretation of traditional mutual aid:

> But, if the missionaries and government officials had studied the problem with the chiefs and leaders, together they might have been able to reinterpret the ideal and revamp the customs in a workable form. ... The approach might have been something like this:
>
> "In the past we Dakotas honored each other, principally by expecting help from each other. ... It worked well because we were all in position to act the same way. Nowadays conditions are different. No longer can we all meet these demands equally. But we may still go on honoring each other in a new way. Still confident in each other's loyalty, we can honor each other by taking pride in helping ourselves, thereby sparing each other undue hardship for our sakes".[3]

At a minimum, this is awkward territory for theoretical interpretation. Should we ignore arguments of this kind as strategic or mistaken, or take them seriously as the views of a Dakota thinker who thought more deeply about traditional reciprocity than any of her readers? Must our overall interpretations square with this claim, or can it be set aside as not really capturing the core of her work? This question seems particularly acute for Temin's book, which portrays North American Indigenous thought as recurrently anti-capitalist. Does Deloria's emphasis on reciprocity, albeit reconfigured in this way, keep her within that trajectory? Or is she expressing an authentic reconciliation of Dakota worldviews and self-focused market relations? How should one decide one way or the other?

Which aspects of kinship relations should we see as central for the book's vision, given the complexity of many of the kinds of relationships that Deloria describes? Dakota practices involved "avoidance" or "respectful" relations with some relatives, particularly across gender lines. Presumably we don't want much of this in our own vision of relationality. But what stays and goes? Is the primary focus on something like hospitality and economic reciprocity, or something else?

[2] Deloria, *Speaking of Indians*, 133; emphasis original.
[3] Deloria, *Speaking of Indians*, 131–32.

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Deloria holds that the Dakota are "the peaceful ones," and arguably holds that most Indigenous peoples share a worldview roughly like the Dakota view in regard to relationality. Given the apparent record of violent conflict between Indigenous peoples in North America before contact, and the clear inter-Indigenous violence in the historical record—ask the Crows about Dakota peacefulness—it seems that having a relational conception of human life may not be so pacifying as Deloria suggests. How should one evaluate inter-Indigenous violence within Deloria's categories? How should this fit within the book's project more generally?

Figures that are appealing to political theorists overall may have said many things that are not particularly appealing. While some of them can be reframed as strategic claims put before given audiences, not all of them can comfortably be understood in this way. It is understandable that political theorists want to draw out the most appealing version of oppositional political viewpoints, so that they can be seen and evaluated in their strongest form. Indeed, one might argue that this is a duty for those who are doing conceptual rather than purely historical work. But should we worry about second-guessing first-rate political writers? What are the proper tools for deciding where we will focus our interests and analysis in the works of intellectually and politically astute writers like Deloria, once we have acknowledged them as figures to help our thinking? What is our duty toward elements of their thinking that may deeply trouble us today? I have no easy answers, but do not see how we can avoid questions of this kind.

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