This is not a Peace Pipe: The Continued Struggle for Lakota Liberation

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This is not a Peace Pipe: The Continued Struggle for Lakota Liberation

Nick Estes*


The republication of Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz’s classic 1977 *The Great Sioux Nation* upholds its reputation as an oral history and testament of the Sioux Nation’s struggle for liberation. The archetypal historical narrative of the American Indian Movement’s (AIM) 72-day siege of the Wounded Knee Massacre site in 1973 reads like a script that ends with the AIM and the defiant Indians ultimately succumbing to the vanquishing forces of the U.S. government. It is Dunbar-Ortiz’s contribution to challenge this prevailing narrative.

*The Great Sioux Nation* picks up following the aftermath of the Wounded Knee siege during a 13-day December 1974 hearing in a federal courtroom in Lincoln, Nebraska. What presiding Federal Judge Warren Urbom expected was a hearing for 65 defendants accused of various criminal acts allegedly committed during the Wounded Knee siege. What the Judge got, instead, was a “Sioux Treaty Hearing” with traditional Lakota leaders filling the jury box and sitting in judgment of the USA. *The Great Sioux Nation* is a compilation of the edited 3000 pages of court proceedings and includes 49 witness testimonies from traditional Natives, scholars, lawyers, and activists. The witnesses were allowed to swear on the Sacred Pipe rather than the Bible. AIM spiritual leader Leonard Crow Dog summarized the importance of this act: “We call it the Sacred Pipe first of all... But the white man called it the peace pipe. And then he couldn’t live by what he said was the peace pipe.” (36)

The new edition of *The Great Sioux Nation* begins with a new foreword by Philip Deloria, author of two important manuscripts on Native history, *Playing Indian* (1999) and *Indians in Unexpected Places* (2006). It only seems right that Philip Deloria, the son of the late Native scholar and activist Vine Deloria, Jr. (2005), prefaces a book that continues the vision which his father helped create and which lay the foundation for twenty-first century Indigenous struggles for

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sovereignty and liberation. The 2013 republication also features an Author’s Note by Dunbar-Ortiz, reflecting on how the book and her role as a lifelong and well-respected Indigenous activist-scholar have, over the last 36 years, taken her from the courtroom in Lincoln, Nebraska to the United Nations headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. Dunbar-Ortiz writes, “Immediately after the 1974 hearing I was swept away into the unchartered territory of forging an international Indigenous movement” (v).

The rest of the book is split into seven topical parts that are organized around several important historical themes: the Wounded Knee Massacre, the Wounded Knee siege, the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty, the Lakota oral tradition, and the violence colonialism and dispossession have wrought on the Lakota and Native Nations of North America. The Great Sioux Nation concludes with Judge Urbom’s decision that his court had no power to uphold the sovereignty of the Sioux Nation and the defendants were not exempt from criminal jurisdiction under the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty. The book and the story, however, do not end there. Urbom’s decision is circumvented in the final section aptly titled “It Does Not End Here.” This section elucidates the international strategy adopted as the next logical step in the Lakota Nation’s struggle for liberation. Six months prior to the court proceedings at Lincoln the first International Indian Treaty Council met at Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. This Treaty Council drafted the “Declaration of Continuing Independence” that outlined the international direction the Lakota and Indigenous peoples of North American set out. What came of this original 1974 meeting of the International Indian Treaty Council was a three-decade struggle that involved hundreds of Indigenous nations and peoples from across the globe and resulted in the 2007 United Nations’ “Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.”

This struggle for international recognition is the culmination of over 500 years of struggle and resistance by the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. For the Lakota Nation, this struggle is recounted in the oral testimony recorded in that Nebraska courtroom. This testimony bears witness to how the Lakota understand the struggle for sovereignty and liberation as materially and spiritually tied to land. Land dispossession has been the defining feature of the colonization of the Indigenous peoples of America. Although it was land that defined the subjugation of the Lakota Nation, putting the 1868 Treaty into material and spiritual practice meant violent struggle for the 25 million acres it promised. Gladys Bissonette explained the struggle, “Anything of violence on our part has been provoked by the United States,” which did not live up to the 1868 Treaty. Furthermore, Bissonette stated, “We are showing the people of the world that justice must be done” (176).

The republication of Dunbar-Ortiz’s The Great Sioux Nation arrives on the heels of the 40th anniversary of the Wounded Knee siege, now recognized as “Lakota Liberation Day” by the Oglala Sioux Tribe. Among the celebrants at Wounded Knee this year were tribal council members wearing AIM t-shirts, Wounded Knee veterans,
AIM members from across the continent, families and allies of AIM, and, more importantly, young Lakota patriots wearing AIM badges and flying the flags of liberation “In the Spirit of Crazy Horse”—as the saying goes. For this younger generation of Lakota patriots immersed in the continued struggle for liberation (myself included), The Great Sioux Nation is more important today than it was in 1977 for its courage and brevity in telling the Lakota’s historical struggle. Dunbar-Ortiz’s book is testimony to the oath the witnesses took on the Sacred Pipe in 1974 that our struggle for the liberation of our homelands and an international Indigenous liberation movement would continue. Hecutu Welo!

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**Different Hues of Red and Green**

*Patrick Bigger*


*What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know about Capitalism* is an important, if flawed, work that explains capitalism’s tendencies toward crisis and environmental catastrophe for people already attuned to the magnitude of problems facing the world’s natural environment. At the same time, those environmental problems are defined for readers already sympathetic to anti-capitalism, but who may brush aside environmental concerns as somehow secondary to the task of transcending capitalist social relations. This short book (187 pages) is largely free of high-level political economic jargon, instead favoring direct language that will be more accessible to nonacademic audiences. While a laudable approach, academic readers may find the language imprecise at times and some citations of questionable merit, perhaps to the point of distraction. Some topics in *What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know about Capitalism* were covered in the authors’ last effort, *The Great Financial Crisis* (Foster and Magdoff 2010), but this book takes a different tack for reaching wider audiences, an approach that sometimes treads dangerously close to pandering to bourgeois green activists. That said, this book represents a significant contribution toward the popularization of a red–green critique, though in shades of red and green that may take some readers by surprise.

The argument of the book is straightforward and will likely be familiar to readers of this journal. Capitalism must always be in a state of growth, even as the activities necessary for accumulation undermine the material basis for reproduction of humanity.

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