

Absence Does Not Make the Indigenous Political Heart Grow Fonder

David E. Wilkins

As a graduate student in the early 1980s, I was having a tough time deciding my future career path. Vine Deloria Jr., the leading Native philosophical activist, encouraged me to study political science. Even though he, himself, was a theologian with a law degree, he understood that politics was woven into every issue in Indian Country and that the fundamental relationship between Native nations and the United States was a political one with deep roots in diplomacy. He was of the opinion that the field of political science offered a vastly underutilized venue for scrutiny, analysis, and incorporation of Native thought. Introducing indigenous perspectives would not only empower Indian Country but had the potential to transform our collective worldviews.

But Deloria was also a pragmatist. There were no Indigenous political scientists (that we were aware of) at that time, and he felt that if I could manage to get my degree I would be well-positioned to secure a good job. As usual, his instincts were right. When I defended my dissertation on comparative politics from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1990, I was immediately offered two jobs and I accepted the one at the University of Arizona in Tucson. I had completed my M.A. in political science with a concentration in Federal Indian Policy from the University of Arizona under Deloria in 1982,¹ and since he had just accepted a permanent position at the University of Colorado, Tucson seemed the logical place to begin my career. Having come of age during a time of great social upheaval, I entered the academy and my field with a measure of optimism, although I harbored no illusions about the challenges that lay ahead.

When I attended my first American Political Science Association annual conference in 1990, I met up with Gerald (Taiaiake) Alfred (a Mohawk), Franke Wilmer, and several others, who, like me, were just entering the

Academy. It was there we began to plot a strategy that we hoped might open the discipline's intellectual doors to Indigenous governments and issues. Those conversations have never ceased, though they have become more sporadic and have taken on a more cynical edge with time. Each of us has done our part in our own teaching and writing but optimism about opening doors has diminished. It is frustrating to realize all these years later that the majority of political scientists have not, and will not, seek to engage Native governments or issues, despite the myriad compelling reasons why they should.

After nine years at the University of Arizona, I was recruited to the University of Minnesota by the American Indian Studies Department. Although I hold an affiliate position with the political science department at Minnesota, that department had never committed to actually hire an individual with specific interests in Indigenous issues. Then, in 2015, they hired a scholar who specializes in political theory, which seems to be the only subfield brave enough to occasionally tackle Native political concepts, structures, and values.

Given my experience, I was surprised to read Kennan Ferguson's strong essay calling out the discipline of political science for its narrow and rarified concentrations. Here, finally, was a non-native political scientist who recognized that excluding indigenous perspectives was detrimental to all our work. Ferguson's essay made me curious as to how he incorporated native material in his courses. Upon visiting his website I was able to browse syllabi for four of the seven courses he listed but I found no mention of Indigenous scholars or their works, or even any works by non-natives about indigenous issues.

I was ready to chalk it all up to another mainstream scholar trying to garner attention through use of an incendiary topic—just garden-variety academic colonialism. Still, the essay had merit so I thought it would be best to withhold judgment until I had the full story. I e-mailed Ferguson, introduced myself, and expressed my surprise at the absence of native scholars or materials, given the earnestness with which he had written his essay on the discipline's silence on these issues. I asked whether those courses reflected the totality of his course offerings.

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If they did, I said it was hypocritical of him to chastise others while making no effort to include native voices in his own work.

Ferguson wrote me back promptly, and politely reminded me that we had met when he had come through Minnesota in 2014 while he was on sabbatical to research the topic we are now examining. We had talked over lunch about our discipline's struggles around indigenous matters. I recalled our conversation and apologized for my poor memory for names. He acknowledged that some of the syllabi on his website were "out of date," and frankly admitted that his own teaching around these issues had "been as blinkered as the next professor's." He had since commenced a new course on Native political theory—a syllabus not yet posted—that included a majority of works by and about Native authors.

I no longer harbor visions of political scientists including discussions or analysis of Native governments, issues, or personalities in their everyday courses or scholarship and I concur with nearly all the eight reasons Ferguson gives as to why that is the case, in particular, a preoccupation with the state, the field's anti-history bias, and its emphasis on interest groups. But the most powerful line in his essay is in the conclusion where he writes that "disciplinary intellectual imperialism" has and continues to play a major role in the absence of the indigenous voice in the field of political science.

Disciplinary intellectual imperialism, swaddled in the flag of American exceptionalism, means that those who

have power and influence in our field have no incentive to question, let alone change, the existing paradigm. Because most work is confined within such rigid parameters, it becomes overwrought, self-referential, and devoid of real-world application. And I see nothing on the horizon to indicate that there will be any substantive alterations in the intellectual pursuits of most political scientists anytime soon. Those who have labored to learn the system with its highly specialized language and hierarchies have no reason to incorporate indigenous ideas into their work in any meaningful way.

That said, Ferguson's analysis and his own personal efforts to address these wrongs give me some small hope that at least the conversations we had so many years ago are continuing. They might someday lead to a truly open door and invigorated intellectual discourse that includes indigenous perspectives. While I had the benefit of a small cadre of like-minded colleagues sharing my vision for a more inclusive, more useful, more intellectually-diverse discipline, I believe Ferguson will find the road a very lonely one.

Note

- 1 In 1979 Deloria secured a tenured appointment in the political science department at the University of Arizona. He proceeded to develop an M.A. degree program that focused on federal Indian policy in the department, the first graduate-level degree in the nation focused on native issues. I was in the second cohort of native students he recruited to the program.