

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The Struggle for the Land: Indigenous Insight and Industrial Empire in the Semi. Edited by Paul A. Olson.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/14k3z2kd>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 15(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Anderson, Terry L.

Publication Date

1991-06-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

The Struggle for the Land: Indigenous Insight and Industrial Empire in the Semi. Edited by Paul A. Olson. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990. 317 pages. \$35.00 cloth.

The papers in this volume argue that indigenous people from the Great Plains of North America to the outback of Australia to the plains of Africa survived by adapting their institutions and consumption to the constraints of their semiarid environments. However, this adaptation turned to "maladaptation" (see chapter 1) when the colonizing Europeans reversed the process by trying to make the environment conform to European institutions.

The unifying theme is sustainability, which is a term seized upon by social scientists to rationalize the tensions between modern economic development and wise resource conservation. Using this theme, many of the authors romanticize indigenous use of resources prior to European development. As the editor notes at the outset, "The authors in this volume argue that pastoral nomadic and hunter-gatherer peoples who live in semiarid regions are rational—that in the main they have used their worlds in sustainable ways that have permitted them to produce the goods necessary to their long-term survival . . ." (p. 2).

Unfortunately, the concept of sustainability provides a slender analytical thread upon which to hang the important issues addressed in this book. As one critic of the concept of sustainability put it, "Its beguiling simplicity and apparently self-evident meaning have obscured its inherent ambiguity."

To reduce this ambiguity and clarify the central lesson from *The Struggle for the Land*, we might define sustainability as human adaptation to the unique circumstances of time and place. In this context, the important question to ask is, Under what institutions is adaptation more likely to occur?

The writers in this volume make it clear that indigenous people responded to environmental constraints through decentralized institutions. Several chapters describe how community relations within indigenous populations promoted good resource stewardship. In the chapter on "Human Adaptations to the Great Plains," John Bennett provides an invaluable essay toward this end.

Sustainability disappeared when indigenous people were confronted with centralized, governmental controls that eroded

community norms that had evolved over centuries. Indigenous institutions were replaced with European concepts of property and government that were inimical to the survival of indigenous cultures.

The authors provide good evidence that indigenous people could have adapted their ways to the changing constraints brought on by European migration had they been given the opportunity. Eighteenth-century fur trade put pressure on trapping territories and led the Montagnais Indians of Labrador to improve resource stewardship. "The Substitution of Cattle for Bison on the Great Plains" (chapter 3) might have progressed more smoothly if Indians had been allowed to develop customary rules on their reservations. When this transition began, it followed traditional communal forms of organization. Finding this "communism" unacceptable, however, non-Indian reformers forced individual allotment upon the reservations, thus removing the possibility for self-determination and leaving the Indians with one-tenth of their land. Evidence from South Africa (chapter 5) and Australia (chapter 6) suggests a similar pattern.

Unfortunately, part 3, on "European and Indigenous Institutions," fails to deliver convincing arguments regarding the impact of other "neocolonialist development interventions" (p. 190) for hydroelectric generation, mining, and grazing. Subsidized development of resources by central governments not only resulted in environmental degradation, but removed indigenes from the decision-making process, ignoring their cultures and institutions. The introduction to part 3 correctly notes that "the destruction of traditional institutions for using the land and governing its use represents an issue of the abuse of justice and right" (p. 191). Unfortunately, insufficient details are provided to show how centralized governments promoted this destruction.

For more than a century, immigrating Europeans have dealt with indigenes through a "system of national 'trusteeship' over tribal people and their natural resources" (p. 204), and this system has failed miserably. My own research on agricultural productivity on American Indian reservations reveals that trust lands, *ceteris paribus*, are between 30 and 80 percent less productive than comparable fee simple lands. The main reason for this lower productivity is the high cost of reorganizing inputs to improve productivity under the layers of bureaucratic control on

trust lands. By continuing to treat indigenes as incompetent wards of the state, centralized government has thwarted self-determination and economic progress.

Once "the struggle for the land" is seen in the context of a struggle between centralized and decentralized institutions, it may be possible to discover ways of restructuring institutions to promote self-determination and allow indigenes to adapt in their own way to their particular environments. For this restructuring to occur, nonindigenous trustees will have to give up control of their wards. Dislodging the well-entrenched bureaucracies will require further research demonstrating their detrimental impacts. For the indigenes themselves, restructuring will require accepting responsibility for their own fate. Research in this volume suggests that indigenous peoples were able to adapt to their environments in the past, and there is no reason to believe that they cannot do so today.

Adaptation, however, will require the recognition that many constraints have changed, so that what worked in the past may not work today. "Preservation-for-emulation of the sustainable ways of life" (p. 191) simply for the sake of preservation will not improve the situation for indigenes. It is clear from *The Struggle for the Land* that indigenous sustainability did not emanate from large, centralized governments insensitive to cultural and environmental conditions that are time and place specific. Prior to the arrival of colonizing Europeans, indigenous people lived in decentralized communities that could adapt, and it is this adaptation that must be emulated.

If indigenes are to survive in the modern, industrial world, they must emulate the best from their past while recognizing the opportunities of the present. After all, there are "no more buffalo." Such adaptation is not likely to be directed from national capitals or even from tribal governments. As in the past, it will require individuals, families, and small groups to take responsibility for their own destiny and to respond to their immediate circumstances.

Terry L. Anderson
Montana State University