

Marginalizing Politics: The Conceptual and Epistemological Barriers to American Indians

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This question should be unsettling. And it is. We need to interrogate these claims. First, we might ask: what does Ferguson mean? How does a discipline *hate* [American Indians]? The provocation is intentionally broad because Ferguson observes that the discipline of political science does not include Native American scholars, questions, viewpoints, or published scholarship. These “erasures and elisions” are not just the absence of Native people in our academic departments; it’s everything.

Second, we might ask ourselves with some mixture of skepticism and anxiety: is this true? Ferguson does not provide us with any data to back up his claims. Indeed, in a testy footnote, he contends that the exclusion of Native political scientists and perspectives is so extensive that their presence is “too meager to even begin to quantify.” While perhaps not convincing as incontrovertible, Ferguson makes the point that his purpose is not to prove or document the absence. But, instead, to ask why.

Ferguson begins his essay with the premise that the situation is not due to simple ignorance, but rather from “a deliberate avoidance of Native claims within mainland U.S. political science.” This contextualizes the claim to the discipline as it exists in a particular geopolitical space. As Ferguson details later, Native scholars and viewpoints are actively included in academic communities and debates in Canada, or, even in Hawai’i. So why is political science in mainland America so unwelcoming?

Ferguson highlights a number of assumptions that he associates with political science that engender these practices of exclusion against Native American views. His diagnoses of the problems are intended to provoke discussion. According to Ferguson, the discipline’s presentist preoccupation with interest groups and the formal

institutions of the law in internationally-recognized nation-states obscures many of the important themes and questions for Native politics.

We might go even further, however. A critical reflection on Native American politics and perspectives doesn’t simply push us to rethink our core concepts, such that American Indians are not easily understood as another ethnic group rather than sovereign nations within a nation. It challenges our normative understandings of the American political system as a whole. The United States is no longer the contemporary model of consolidated democracy to be exported and promoted abroad. Instead, we have a long history of settler colonialism and the continued marginalization of indigenous nations within our own borders.

While Ferguson highlights important conceptual blinders, he neglects how dominant epistemological assumptions also present significant barriers to Native American scholarship. Thus, the concern for generalizability in the discipline renders Native Americans a very small and allegedly unique population that is not perceived as representative of any case. Often Native communities are so small that it may be impossible to fully anonymize quantitative or qualitative datasets and thus scholars who do research on Native Americans are not ethically able to comply with recent editorial calls for data access and transparency. Complicating attempts at enforcing disciplinary standards, some tribal institutional review boards insist that whatever data is produced is either owned, controlled, or at minimum, vetted by the tribal nation. When Native or non-Native scholars approach research as a more collaborative process, the gatekeepers of the discipline question the objectivity of the data collection and analysis. Hence, scholarship on Native American politics is often viewed as having weak internal *and* external validity. It is not simply the way we think about politics but also the dominant methodologies for studying them that excludes Native American scholarship.

So what do we do? Ferguson itemizes a long list of changes that might help decolonize and indigenize

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political science. Many of his points require a reconsideration of the canonical texts and a recognition of the value of Native scholarship across the board. Forums like this symposium are a crucial first step for initiating a dialogue in political science. For this to be a sustained and meaningful conversation, however, our academic departments must hire Native political scientists and support them to build a network of Native and non-Native scholars engaged in these issues in their home institutions and beyond.

This is not a new idea. Scholars from other world regions (primarily outside of political science) have long protested the colonization of knowledge production and

have built networks to facilitate the development and dissemination of a new perspective. Archie Mafeje, a South African anthropologist, insisted on the need to indigenize understandings of Africa. And, the Council on the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) was established in Dakar, Senegal, in 1973 to facilitate research and collaboration between African scholars on the continent. Even if, as Ferguson suggests, these other colonialisms are not identical, the experiences of validating indigenous perspectives and building new networks can provide valuable insight for this movement to improve the relationship between political science and American Indians.