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## Review of For an Amerindian Autohistory: An Essay on the Foundations of a Social Ethic

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*For an Amerindian Autohistory: An Essay on the Foundations of a Social Ethic.* By Georges E. Sioui. Translated by Sheila Fischman. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992. Foreword, introduction, epilogue, appendix, notes. xxiv + 125 pp. \$29.95.

The title looks forward to the writing of history from the perspective of Native Americans. Such history would be *autohistory* because it would be written by Native Americans themselves—and by those “who have an Amerindian soul” (p. 105). The “social ethic” in the title is to be a whole new “science”: “The moral code specific to [Native] America is so distinctive that the study of it, through history, constitutes a science” (p. 104).

An ambitious program—but it is soon clear that Sioui's new science is the kind one dangles on a string with a nice, big crystal to attract and disperse “energy.” Sioui explains in chapter one, for example, that Europeans brought virulent diseases to the Americas because Europeans were not in proper balance with nature. Such diseases were unknown in the Americas, because Native Americans *did* live in balance with nature. Indeed, we find here that these diseases might very well have been the reason for the European immigration in the first place. This discovery, in turn, will help white folk “in the process of shedding guilt,” and so they can all join the great circle and reason together. And this, in turn, is important because “Amerindians always say that to attain reason, one must first treat the emotions with honour and respect” (p. 5).

Think of all one would have to know in order to make such generalizations. Sioui manages to cover this territory in just five pages. For evidence he refers to the following: a 1966 population study, Le Roy-Ladurie's *Le Territoire de l'historien* (1978), a 1969 history of Canada, two quotations from early Jesuit missionaries, one page from *Akwesasne Notes* (1976), and the remarks of a Seneca historian at an academic conference.

In fact, this book may best be described as Sioui's own, idiosyncratic sense of certain

loosely related matters having to do with Indians. It is in this sense, really, that the book is “*autohistory*.” What are Sioui's views—aside from the history of disease? Native Americans are, of course, all perfectly in tune with nature. (Sioui has evidently forgotten the Mayans' ecological disaster.) And Indians are all, all of them, alike. Evidence? Their languages are “surprisingly homogenous” (p. 11); here Sioui's evidence is a quotation from an “ethnologist” writing in 1868! (More recent linguists point to the remarkable *diversity* of the Indian languages.) Indians all have the same philosophy. Indians are naturally peaceful. (Sioui should look again at some of the as-told-to autobiographies of Plains warriors.) Indians all incline to feminine social systems—“gynecocracies”—where, because the women are superior, there is equality (p. 16). Sioui's Indians begin to sound like some one of the less memorable peoples Gulliver met in the course of his travels.

It is easy to share Sioui's hope that more Native Americans will come to write history and ethnography. But there is, of course, already an honorable tradition of such work. Perhaps it would be well to mention a *few* of these. There have been professional ethnographers such as Francis LaFlesche and Alfonso Ortiz. There have been tribal historians such as Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, John Joseph Mathews, and John Stands in Timber. There have been popular writers on tribal culture and history such as Gertrude Simmons Bonnin and Charles Eastman. And hundreds of Indians have worked as informants with formally trained ethnographers and historians.

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