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Review of *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. By Jonathan Lear

Rodney Frey
University of Idaho

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Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation. By Jonathan Lear. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. 187 pp. Photographs, notes, index. \$22.95 cloth, \$15.95 paper.

Jonathan Lear's *Racial Hope* is a most remarkable, engaging, and thought-provoking interpretation of one man's account of the collapse of his culture, as well as the hope he offers for a future for his people. Based on the life story of Plenty Coups (as recorded by Frank Linderman during the late 1920s), Lear considers two equally profound images offered by this Crow elder, one engrained in the statement, "after this nothing happened," referring to what happened after being placed on a reservation, and the other in the medicine dreams of Plenty Coups in which the destruction of the Indian people is foretold for all but those who follow the example of the Chickadee, listening and learning from the mistakes of others. Plenty Coups thus provides the Crow with what Lear calls a "radical hope" for renewal that survives their destruction, though in a form of survival that could not be anticipated at the time.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Plenty Coups and the Crow indeed experienced seemingly overwhelming forces that sought a complete annihilation of their way of life. Lear identifies two pivotal Crow cultural expressions, the planting of the coup stick during battle and buffalo hunting, the elimination of which led to the collapse of all that was meaningful for the Crow. Lear frames the particular challenge of Plenty Coups and the Crow within the larger human context, asking how would any of us react in the face of a complete collapse of our culture? What *are* the possibilities for hope?

Lear's approach is fundamentally philosophical: an ethical inquiry into how one should behave in relation to a particular human possibility, as well as an ontological inquiry into the meaning and nature of that particular possibility. He reiterates throughout his interpretation that it is not about what actually happened, not an anthropological or historical accounting. He explores such associated issues as the meaning of despair, identity, dreams, hope, and tradition, offering as well an intriguing interpretation of

the contrasting responses to cultural collapse manifested by Sitting Bull and the Ghost Dance on the one hand, and that advocated by Plenty Coups on the other. Lear's interpretation is heavily grounded in the European philosophy and psychology of such thinkers as Aristotle, Kant, and Freud.

This innovative interpretative work stimulated for this reader so many questions. To what extent can the experiences of one individual, albeit a great chief, reflect and influence the experiences of an entire society? To what extent did Plenty Coups and Linderman implicitly convey a story that emphasized a nostalgic passing of a way of life and thus color an understanding of Crow cultural and historical experience? Was the Crow way of life so totally centered on buffalo hunting, planting the coup stick, and intertribal warfare that with their elimination an entire culture collapsed? Lear maintains that the Crow held fast to a "law of excluded middle" that prevented them from envisioning future possibilities other than continuing their way of life. So when their way of life was destroyed, the Crow faced complete devastation.

But is this an appropriate read of the Crow experience? Certainly other major Crow institutions continued, such as a rich body of oral traditions, language proficiency, the clan system, the sweat lodge, and vision questing, providing individual Crows with a means for social role identity and cultural ideals to embody. Was Crow culture so rigid and static that it could not adapt to the changing situations? The buffalo hunting and counting coups way of life was a relatively new cultural expression, coming about only after the Crow had moved onto the Plains, incorporated the horse into their culture, and given up their semisedentary, agricultural way of life. Had the Crow faced a collapse of the prehorse culture as well? And finally, what is it that constitutes "culture" and "tradition"? To what extent were counting coups and the planting of the coup stick behavioral expressions, elaborate and very significant to be sure, of a more pervasive underlying cultural ideal? And with the changed social circumstances, the cession of intertribal warfare, could that underlying cultural ideal nevertheless continue and find other ways to manifest itself for individuals, such as serving in the United States

military, competing in the rodeo or a political contest, thus continuing to provide individuals with a meaningful way of life? And could not a “borrowed” institution such as the Shoshone-form of Sundancing or the bronc-riding and horse racing of the Western rodeo be identified by the Crow as a “traditional” expression manifesting a persistent cultural ideal, such as self-sacrifice for family clan members or excellence in horsemanship?

I am curious why Lear was concerned about the possibility of being “offensive” in his use of the terms “white man” and “Indian,” while seemingly not concerned about the use of the term “squaw” in reference to Crow women? Also, in his comparison of the responses to culture collapse by Sitting Bull and the Ghost Dance with that of Plenty Coups, Lear maintains that Wovoka, who had inspired the Ghost Dance, is also “credited with having introduced the peyote religion to the Indian tribes of the South and West.” It is my understanding that Wovoka opposed the use of peyote, the peyote religion only being introduced into his home community after his death.

These questions are not meant to distract from Lear’s insightful, well-articulated, and fresh interpretation of what it can mean to experience the collapse of one’s culture and the hope that can bring about a meaningful future. I highly recommend *Radical Hope* for all audiences.

RODNEY FREY
Programs in Anthropology and
American Indian Studies
University of Idaho