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**Review of *Organizing the Lakota: The Political Economy of the
New Deal on the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Reservations* by
Thomas Biolsi**

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Organizing the Lakota: The Political Economy of the New Deal on the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Reservations. Thomas Biolsi. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1992. x + 244 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, and references. \$35.00 cloth.

This book is an important contribution to the growing literature base which seeks to illuminate critical federal Indian laws and policies by incorporating the

historical dimension, utilizing economic data, and analyzing political events. Biolsi strives to accomplish this by employing a political-economic paradigm: an historical approach which emphasizes the relationships between the society, polity, and the economy.

The major goal of this study is to explain the “politics of organizing the Lakota” during the commissionership of John Collier whose brainchild policy, the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934, was the major piece of reform legislation ostensibly designed to “usher in a new era of self-government in Indian affairs” (p. xx). Biolsi begins his analysis by tracing the establishment of the two reservations in the 1880s. In this first chapter he meticulously examines the various “technologies of power” created by the OIA that enabled federal officials to control both individual and tribal behavior: federally-sanctioned courts and a police force, the ration system, and administrative restrictions on tribal and individual trust lands and funds. Here, Biolsi also makes his pitch—the predominant theme of the work—that the Lakota basically acquiesced to federal domination. While acknowledging that there were occasional outbursts of open resistance, i.e., the Ghost Dance movement of the 1890s and other less visible “everyday forms of resistance” (dissimulation, appeals for administrative reconsideration of specific cases, etc.) the author contends that the Lakota were generally reluctant to challenge the Office of Indian Affairs because of their “dependence” on the resources administered by the BIA.

The author, however, sends out contradictory messages on the Lakota’s apparent “resignation” to their subordinate position vis-a-vis the federal government. In several places he mentions Lakota dependence on federal material resources as being the chief reason they did not more tenaciously contend BIA presence. Moreover, for some inarticulate reason he disavows the use of the term **hegemony** to describe the federal-Lakota relationship. But in reality, as his own data conclusively show, and as he himself admits on more than one occasion, the Lakota were physically, politically, psychologically, and culturally dominated by the OIA, especially in the years before the IRA.

Biolsi should probably then have turned to a discussion of what James Scott called the “everyday forms of resistance” that powerless peoples often use to survive. Biolsi had alluded to these “Weapons of the Weak” in his introduction.

In succeeding chapters, Biolsi gives a splendid account of pre-1934 Lakota politics (Chapter 2); describes the events of 1933-34 when Collier was selling his New Deal to the tribes (Chapter 3); narrates the development of the tribal constitutions on both reservations (Chapter 4); and discusses the political-

economic effects of the New Deal's programs in the context of reservation politics.

In his two strongest and most informative chapters (6 and 7) Biolsi first describes the technical and administrative "weapons of the strong" used by the OIA which effectively "disempowered" the very tribal governments they were supposed to empower; and second he analyzes the internal political segmentation that was exacerbated, though not created, among the Lakotas between what he called the "Old Dealers" and the "New Dealers."

Biolsi does offer a nice corrective to the literature by showing that it was not only mixed-bloods that joined the New Deal and, conversely, that not all full-bloods were opposed to the IRA. His research confirms, however, that all of the early chairmen of the IRA tribal councils were mixed-bloods.

In an abbreviated and somewhat prickly concluding chapter, the author attempts to connect the internal tribal conflicts aroused during the New Deal era of Indian self-rule with the historic events culminating in the 1973 conflict at Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The author argues that the Wounded Knee takeover was primarily about the abolition of the Oglala Sioux Tribal Council (p. 183).

It is certainly true that most of the people supporting the Independent Oglala Nation and the American Indian Movement wanted the Oglala Sioux Tribal Council, headed by the infamous Dick Wilson, invalidated. However, they by no means exempted the U.S. from severe scrutiny. As Deloria and Lytle argue, Wounded Knee was a conflict over the question of how the Lakota, "and by extension other Indians, should deal with the untenable situation created by the federal government in their communities" (1984:12).

The work has several other problems as well. While generally doing a credible job of emphasizing the historical dimension, several crucial federal policies are underexamined. We receive, for example, too little information about the events and personalities involved in the 1868 treaty and the 1877 agreement. Furthermore, the General Allotment Act and its subsequent amendments, the single most disastrous federal Indian policy, is not discussed nearly enough.

Finally, I held out hope for a greater synthesis of the documentary record with oral history (the author interviewed over 70 Lakota), something promised in the introduction. Instead, the data derived from his multitude of interviews is sparsely and unevenly integrated into the text.

Notwithstanding these troublesome spots, this is a valuable case study of the political-economic history of two tribes during a traumatic period of history. It is a must read for anyone interested in tribal responses to internal colonialism,

federal efforts to implement the Indian Reorganization Act and simultaneously maintain a preeminent position with respect to tribal autonomy, and internal tribal politics. **David E. Wilkins (Lumbee)**, *Department of Political Science, University of Arizona, Tucson*.