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PhD Dissertation Review: Anna Krausová, 'Rebuilding the White Earth Nation: Tracing the Long-Term Process of Constitutional Reform'

This is a well-justified topic area for a dissertation, and it adopts a logical structure for responding to the questions it poses. Examining the White Earth Anishinaabe constitutional crisis through a historical study of varying periods of United States American Indian policy is certainly a valid approach. In the U.S. both throughout the twentieth century and today, the political structures of Native nations are inevitably shaped by relations with federal and state governments.

As it is, however, the dissertation has many limitations, most of which ultimately hinge on its relatively short length. The dissertation has scratched the surface of the topic area, and presented an argument in relation to it, but has not gone into sufficient analysis to convincingly support its own contentions. I have divided this report into sections on methodology, argument, analysis, and technical aspects to demonstrate the limitations of the dissertation and pose questions to aid in furthering developing this work.

Methodology

Krausová has done well to consider Anishinaabe epistemology in the dissertation, acknowledging the cultural basis of the White Earth Nation. The discussion of *bimaawizidin* ethics in Chapter 4 is absolutely necessary. Chapter 3 on Methodology also notes the importance of "Native American studies", though this is very loosely defined. It also raises a methodological question. Considering the centrality of oral history and the practice of story-telling and community-based research to the growing field of Indigenous studies, was any contact made with the White Earth Nation in conducting this research? Though building transatlantic relations is of course challenging, even limited interviews or e-mail communication may have offered new avenues of interpretation of the material here presented.

In relation to Native studies approaches, the dissertation does make use of important literature relevant to political science, including works by Wilkins and Doerfler. In addition to these, there is a growing body of scholarship on Indigenous governance beyond settler colonial state systems. Does the author here consider Native nation-building and the development of constitutions synonymous? I recommend Glen Coulthard's *Red Skin, White Masks* and Jeff Corntassel's *Forced Federalism* as starting-points for challenging such presumptions. Though a focus on the White Earth constitution is justified, an awareness of the limitations of constitutions would demonstrate a more sophisticated understanding on Native nation-building.

A second issue is how successfully political science approaches have here been applied to an Indigenous context. The genealogical method is here described as a way to "investigate how outwardly imposed changes and regulations become internalized", but how this method is applied in practice is not clear. Chapter 5 (p 66) states

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that “Understanding the persistence of inefficient MCT institutions is also possible through genealogical method which reveals how outwardly imposed rules and regulations become internalized.” But the chapter does not actually discuss *how* such rules and regulations were internalized by members of White Earth, or what evidence there is of this happening. The use of this method needs to be more clearly explicated in the dissertation in order to demonstrate its worth.

Argument

The dissertation’s main argument is that the White Earth constitution has remained unratified due to the path-dependent situation it’s history has lead it to, as well as a “deep internalization of outwardly imposed governing structure.” (abstract) The first part of this argument is essentially sound. The dissertation broadly demonstrates how different policy eras shaped the process of constructing the White Earth constitution, and successfully identifies key impacts of federal policy on White Earth nation-building.

The second part of the argument is more problematic. The dissertation refers in several places to “mixed-bloods” and “full-bloods” as categories of progressive or conservative opinion. Such categories are based on government-imposed blood quantum provisions that are incompatible with Indigenous lifeways. Does such a simplistic divide based on blood quantum truly explain the varied approaches to White Earth governance? In the literature review (p 20) the author acknowledges that focus on “blood” is a colonial imposition and heavily criticized, but in the following chapters these terms are nevertheless used quite often. The work by Doerfler that Krausová references is certainly significant, but I would encourage looking at Doerfler’s more recent work on issues of blood quantum in the White Earth Nation to complicate this simplistic division between “mixed-blood” and “full-blood” factions.

In Chapter 7 (p 106) the author states that “The White Earth Anishinaabeg should realize that every nation follows a path that is never perfect but always more or less bad.” Who exactly – if anyone – in the White Earth nation thinks that they can achieve perfection and where is the evidence of this? Such a generalized statement is, I think, unhelpful and almost patronizing. The dissertation certainly does contain information that could be useful to the White Earth nation in thinking about their constitutional process, but any recommendations should be more thoughtfully phrased.

Analysis

The main area through which the dissertation could be improved is its analysis. In several places in the dissertation (most clearly on p 32) the use of sources not previously consulted by scholars is highlighted. These sources are indeed historically valuable. However, their use is buried within the text and footnotes, rarely explicitly discussing out examples or evidence to support the claims made. Chapter 4 (p 61) includes an example of a better approach, as it quotes a source to support the argument made.

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Elsewhere, however, the tone tends to be descriptive, outlining events and developments. For example, in Chapter 6 (p 75) the creation of the position of tribal manager is described, and several primary sources are cited. However, a clearer analysis of those sources would better support the claims made. What evidence is there that there were “self-seeking individuals” operating within tribal government? Are there any concrete examples of the tribal manager dissipating tribal money in inappropriate ways? More detail in the use of the sources used would elevate such sections from description to analysis.

Moreover, the analysis of the material and understanding of prior scholarship would be better demonstrated by briefly noting how terminology is defined by the author. For instance, settler colonialism (p 22) is mentioned, but not clearly defined. It is certainly true that political science does not usually contend with settler colonialism, but what does it mean within this context? While Krausová does well to identify and include key concepts such as this, a more explicit demonstration of her understanding of them in relation to her own study would better support her analysis.

Technical Aspects

The dissertation includes several photographs as appendices. These images are relevant and potentially useful, but they are not actually mentioned anywhere in the text. References to the appendices within the text (whether as part of the main text or in footnotes) would better demonstrate their significance. The text only makes reference to one appendix, in Chapter 7 (p 97), where the Indian Civil Rights Act is referred to as “Appendix I”. However, the Indian Civil Rights Act is not included in the appendices, and there is no appendix labelled “I”. The author’s own map is clear and well-made. Referring to this in the text – or even including the map somewhere in the introduction chapter – would help the reader to consult the map at appropriate moments.

On a minor note, some of the language choices are unconventional. I wonder whether the term “pre-reorganization period” is the best choice. As Chapter 4 focuses specifically on the “fourteen year period of the first inter-reservation constitutional government” (p. 33) at the beginning of the twentieth century, I would suggest that the “late assimilation” period might better describe this era.

Overall, the main technical issue with the dissertation is undoubtedly its length. The full length of the dissertation is not mentioned in the cover pages, but is only 129 pages (not including title page etc.) with appendices. As such, the dissertation clearly falls short of usual length requirements for a PhD dissertation. Particularly considering the broad scope of the dissertation, spanning from the late nineteenth century to almost the present day, there simply is not enough detail and depth of knowledge here.



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Concluding comment

While the dissertation certainly makes some interesting points and is coherently structured and planned, it lacks the depth of analysis which is usually expected of a PhD. There is undoubtedly potential here to further develop the work and expand its analysis of the topic area – using the important sources here identified – in order to achieve the required level for a good dissertation.

Signed by Reetta Humalajoki
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