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American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2wk913t5>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 24(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

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Publication Date

2000-03-01

DOI

10.17953

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COMMENTARY

Data or Dogma? A Reply to Robert L. Berner

BRUCE E. JOHANSEN

Having now compiled roughly 1,325 items in my annotated bibliography of contentions regarding the Iroquois' role in the development of democracy, I have become used to watching a large number of people bend the subject to fit their own biases as they accuse me of being a mythmaker. Professor Robert L. Berner seems irritated that I have acted as both advocate of the idea and compiler of a bibliography on the subject. Berner is welcome to tell me and the readers of the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* just what my purported biases have compelled me to omit from my annotations. He has not identified any such faults in my account. Instead, he implies that I traffic in "dogma" while he dispenses objective truth.

I have Berner in my record as a critic of my ideas, so he is probably as ideologically driven as he accuses me of being. Berner appears in my second volume of annotations as follows:

1992.002. Berner, Robert. "American Myth: Old, New, Yet Untold."
Genre: Forms of Discourse & Culture 25:4 (Winter, 1992), pp. 377-389.

Berner surveys the debate over Iroquois influence on the development of American democracy in the context of the intellectual fer-

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ment over the quincentenary of Columbus' first landfall in America. Berner dismisses most of the case as evidence of "The tendency toward the creation of new legends in our revisionist era" (p. 380). "In fact," writes Berner, "the structure of matriarchal clans and League council and the council's parliamentary procedures bear no resemblance whatever to the structure of the Constitution" (p. 381). With his mind set in such a manner, Berner finds Johansen's assertion that the Iroquois structure of "younger brothers" and "older brothers" resembled a two-house legislature "rather limp" (p. 382), although "his claims for generally [*sic*] Indian influences on the development of American notions of political freedom proceed from a premise that is worth considering" (p. 382). *Forgotten Founders* and Donald Grinde's 1993 piece in *AICRJ* are cited.¹

The example of the Iroquois was discussed by John Adams at the Constitutional Convention; commentary on Native American political organization is present in the rhetoric of Euramerican tenure in the United States from the time of Roger Williams to this very debate. Why, Professor Berner, do you fix your attention only on the Constitution without surveying the transatlantic contest of ideas for nearly two centuries before and after these specific debates?

Berner is entitled to his opinion that my case is "limp." By my lights, his critique also sadly lacks knowledge of the historical circumstances of this situation. I am biased, of course, but so is he. He is free to fashion his own standards for "proof," and to deny that my "dogma" meets them. In so doing, however, he strays from the point of the bibliographies, which is to provide as complete a record of the debate as possible. The historical evidence Berner complains we lack is available in *Exemplar of Liberty* (1991) published by the UCLA American Indian Studies Center, which I co-authored with Donald A. Grinde, Jr. Berner's published record, as I know it, shows no evidence that he has read this book.

I never have denied my role as advocate of this idea during the quarter century I have researched it; I call on Professor Berner to be as freely forthcoming about his own "angle on the fire." I reserve the right to express myself on the issue, but my annotated record stands as the most complete account available to students of this debate. He or any other critic of the idea has the right to place before the audience a competing bibliography. Berner does not do this. Like some other critics of the idea, Berner makes his case largely from the record that I and other "advocates" have compiled. Note that I have never contended that my work is "objective," a rubber word defined by whomever speaks it.

Anyone who weighs in with an opinion against another opinion and then calls what he attacks "dogma" is making something of a rhetorical tactical error. Professor Berner, tell me which specific annotations my "dogma" has caused me to ignore and I will include them. Just do not attack my "dogma" with your own. Pound me into submission, as you said I try to do, with your own data. Let me have it. Such is the nature of free and open academic debate.

NOTES

1. Bruce E. Johansen, Comp., *Native America and the Evolution of Democracy: A Supplementary Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 99.