



We Talk, You Listen: New Tribes, New Turf

Vine Deloria Jr. , Suzan Shown Harjo (Introduction)

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We Talk, You Listen is strong, boldly unconventional medicine from Vine Deloria Jr. (1933–2005), one of the most important voices of twentieth-century Native American affairs. Here the witty and insightful Indian spokesman turns his penetrating vision toward the disintegrating core of American society.

Written at a time when the traditions of the formerly omnipotent Anglo-Saxon male were crumbling under the pressures of a changing world, Deloria's book interprets racial conflict, inflation, the ecological crisis, and power groups as symptoms rather than causes of the American malaise: "The glittering generalities and mythologies of American society no longer satisfy the need and desire to belong," a theory as applicable today as it was in 1970.

American Indian tribalism, according to Deloria, was positioned to act as America's salvation. Deloria proposes a uniquely Indian solution to the legacy of genocide, imperialism, capitalism, feudalism, and self-defeating liberalism: group identity and real community development, a kind of neo-tribalism. He also offers a fascinating cultural critique of the nascent "tribes" of the 1970s, indicting Chicanos, blacks, hippies, feminists, and others as misguided because they lacked comprehensive strategies and were led by stereotypes rather than an understanding of their uniqueness.

We Talk, You Listen: New Tribes, New Turf Details

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Bernadette says

I am generally very sympathetic to Deloria's views, and I really enjoyed *Custer Died for Your Sins*. So I thought I'd get a lot out of *We Talk, You Listen*. Unfortunately, I was disappointed. In this book, Deloria identifies commonalities and differences between Indians and the various "power" movements, incl. Blacks, Hispanics, and Hippies, all of whom he sees as harbingers of a new world order. Convinced that Americans will not survive the 20th century, Deloria urges various changes in the Americans' individualist philosophy, Constitution, economic system, and land use. This was all fascinating to read, especially if one treats it as a document of the 1970s and has 20-20 hindsight. But I didn't find the palpable anger, biting humor, sharp argumentation, and quotable gems that I remember from his other book. I wonder if *God Is Red* is better?

Nathaniel says

This is a "sequel" of sorts to Deloria's brilliant *Custer Died for Your Sins*, but is much less cohesive than that work, and occasionally contradicts it. It contains a great deal more of the trenchant social commentary which made *Custer* such an effective work; essays about white liberal politics, minority groups' relation to the US Constitution; and the structural differences between capitalist and communal societies are particular highlights. However, these observations are only about half of the work. The rest is responses to a variety of minority activism that was going on at the time, which range from dated but still historically interesting to dated and just disappointing. It almost seems as though Deloria wanted to publish all of the material he didn't include in *Custer*, but then let his publisher dictate what the rest of the book was going to be about, which ended up being "timely" then and dated now.

There are in particular two strands of this book that don't hold up today. The first is the "change or die" fatalistic rhetoric in the last third of the book that implies that white society was inevitably doomed to extinguish itself before my then-unborn generation was old enough to shave unless white people gave up all of their institutions overnight. Deloria himself had just spent two books arguing that this was essentially impossible, so contradicting himself here does that argument no favors and this far after the fact just seems tremendously and stupidly dated.

The second is a major flaw in the book's thesis as pertains to misunderstanding the white Baby Boom generation (here identified as "young white people"). His argument is that white Baby Boomers, through their cultural acts of rebellion, are creating a new "tribe" with more in common with minority groups. This argument is incorrect and actually contradicts an argument Deloria makes in *Custer*, in which he says that young people have no understanding of Indian culture in practice because they haven't absorbed the tribal aspect of it. Throughout this book, he argues the opposite: that Woodstock '69 was a moment of tribal definition for that group and that they would somehow emerge as tribally oriented from that single experience. Of course, we know now that the Baby Boom generation was mostly characterized by being too large to be united politically on anything; that Woodstock was a commercial festival celebrating individual hedonism, not group unity, that trashed the entire town in which it was held; and that liberal activists in general constituted less than 20% of the Baby Boom generation and were in no way representative of the entire iceberg. This facet of Deloria's argument essentially shows that he has no deeper an understanding of white society than whites do of Indian society - he's just very good at analyzing structure.

Overall, this is a book that contains a variety of valuable social commentary and insight and is still well

worth reading today if you are of an open enough mind to appreciate it. However, this is also very much the book that establishes Deloria's limitations as a social critic: one who is much more able to offer a well-reasoned abstract critique than he is able to bring those ideas into the real world.

Matt says

A great read on the failure of the American Indian movement and how to fix it. Vine Deloria explores the ideas of self-determination and group rights under the White constitutional context. Minority groups have been historically oppressed as groups in the legal context. This message is hard to communicate to the radical individualists aka right wingers.

A book that would make us seriously challenge our notion of race and individuality.
