

Book Review

Philip E. Coyle

Foster, Morris W. *Being Comanche: A Social History of an American Indian Community*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1991. xvi + 230 pp. including references, bibliography, and index. \$29.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

Nugent, Daniel. *Spent Cartridges of Revolution: An Anthropological History of Namiquipa, Chihuahua*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. xvi + 225 pp. including references, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 cloth, \$15.95 paper.

These two books break new ground in their linking of ethnographic and archival research. Foster uses an understanding of Comanche social interaction, gained through attendance at contemporary public gatherings (powwows), as an organizing principle for his description of Comanche history. He proposes that “[a] history of the organization and maintenance of the Comanche community is a history of its changing forms of public gathering” (p. 30). Comanche history, Foster argues, can best be understood in terms of the “Indian-Indian interaction” that contemporary Comanches have described in their oral histories, and that he has witnessed during his ethnographic research.

Nugent also uses participant-observation research to frame a historical study. The understanding of the Mexican revolution that he brings to his book was arrived at by listening to consultants and neighbors during his long fieldwork in the 1980s, the years of financial catastrophe and political repression that have come to be referred to in Mexico as *La Crisis (I)*. It is not the data uncovered in documentary archives, but rather “the opportunity to develop an interpretation of documentary sources through discussions with Namiquipans while living with them through yet another epoch of struggle” (p. 7), that give this book its explanatory insights.

Foster starts his discussion with a deconstruction of the name “Comanche.” He points out that, beginning with the Spanish, outsiders have attempted to impose their own meanings of the term “Comanche” on those groups of people who they thought fit that label. Whether thought of as a single polity, that is, a tribe, or a number of more autonomous groups (bands) these conceptualizations were related only to the desires of outsiders who sought either trade, treaty, or military alliance with “Comanches”. Foster argues that these imposed meanings have in no way corresponded to the internal social organization or sense of identity of the people so labeled. Instead, what it means to actually “be

Comanche" is entirely determined through face-to-face social interaction within this group of people.

Foster (p. 24) argues strongly that changes in the Comanche social order have been the result of ongoing work that is required to maintain "social face" in public. The viability of these personas depends upon interpretations of social action inferred by other people sharing a common "communicative competence" (p. 21), an understanding of the patterns of social interaction that index moral investments. The historically shifting Comanche "community," and here Foster draws on the notion of "speech communities" put forth by Gumperz and Hymes, is based on the interactional patterns that define this shared competence in any one period, rather than on any specific and unchanging set of "cultural" signifiers. But in defending the constitutive importance of Comanche-Comanche interaction against acculturation and ethnicity theorists, who would see Comanche identity as determined by outsiders based on the internalization of external symbols and concepts, Foster drives an analytical wedge between social interaction, on the one hand, and signification, on the other.

This separation of social interaction and symbolic production presents a number of difficulties. A close friend and consultant of Foster's (p. 23) points out to him that Comanches "know all the meanings" involved in social interaction. In the book, however, we do not see how symbols drawn from the outside world, like those that underlie peyote gatherings or the Christian church, are linked within a symbolic system recognized as Comanche by Comanches. The theory on which Foster bases his historical reinterpretations becomes functionalist as social actors are removed from the symbolic attachments that give meaning to their lives.

For example, the reader is told of the necessity of regulatory mechanisms (p. 66), the need for public constraints (p. 67), that public gatherings were needed to organize residence units (p. 90), and that if such actions were not taken then "Comanches would fragment among personal networks and political factions, with no basis for a shared sense of 'being Comanche'" (p. 91). We are told that "[t]he Comanches' objective in interactions with Anglo officials was to maintain the ability to continue to 'be Comanche' by whatever economic and political means necessary" (p. 108). But why was it so important to continue "being Comanche"? What is it about Comanche social interaction that has allowed it to continue in myriad forms for over three hundred years? Foster addresses this question only once in the book, and it is at this point that a breach is opened in his strict functionalist interactionism.

Foster states that, "[w]ithout a belief in the sacredness of their relations with one another, communities fly apart... 'being Comanche' is an act of faith that cannot wholly be reduced to an instrumental analysis of political or economic benefit" (pp. 164-165). In other words, Foster would

seem to be arguing that it is this cultural belief in the sanctity of identity, constructed and reconstructed through the play of symbols in practice, that forms the desire for continued public social interaction within the Comanche community. But after momentarily recognizing the importance of such a cultural belief, Foster disparages the importance of the shifting—and so, he argues, relatively unimportant—symbolic systems that underlie social interaction. He writes,

[t]he pattern of repeated interaction constitutes the tradition in each community. The modes of subsistence, the social units, the cultural frameworks, even the languages used in any one period are instrumental rather than fundamental to the pattern that is the tradition (p. 172-173).

As Foster himself acknowledges, however, without shared belief in the sacredness of “being Comanche,” such a pattern of repeated social interaction would fly apart! The problem here is that in emphasizing the internal determination of Comanche identity, Foster has ignored the processes through which symbols may take on compelling new meanings within the Comanche community. For this reason he is forced to backtrack to functionalist explanations in order to account for change, rather than thinking of this as the result of concrete social practices.

Nugent offers a helpful analytical approach in this regard. Like Comanches, Namiquipans have managed to maintain a unique vision of themselves through time. But for Nugent this is not a simple result of ongoing social interaction within the community. Instead, he argues that social interaction is crucially related to an ongoing cultural struggle that involves both the state and the people who are subjected to the relations of production that the state attempts to organize. From this perspective Nugent is able to examine the ways that external symbols are imported, interrogated, embraced, or resisted as they enter the “internal dialectic” (p. 102) of the pueblo. Through this relational process Nugent argues that taken-for-granted notions, like the sanctity of social interaction in the case of the Comanche, can in fact become politically charged in that they help to define what is thought of as “lived and natural” (p. 35). Nugent goes into some detail in describing how one such notion, land, emerges as a key term in a series of struggles between Namiquipans and the state.

Struggles over just how to understand this politically charged notion continue to the present day in Namiquipa. The point to be made here, however, is that the alternative understandings that Namiquipans defend have, “rather less to do with externally imposed or derived determinations and rather more with internally controlled practices rooted in the community” (p. 113). Nugent, like Foster, sees the institutional memories of the communities under study as an ongoing force in their relations with the outside world. But Nugent’s approach has the poten-

tial to explain more completely the way closely held symbols like "land" and "work" or, for that matter, the sanctity of social interaction, are established and reproduced within a particular community.

Ironically, however, although Nugent's approach to cultural struggle provides a dialectical movement that is missing from the functionalism of Foster's social interactionist approach, Nugent himself could take a lesson from Foster in the latter's focus on microsociological description. Although Nugent gives a few tantalizing glimpses of the social interaction involved in Namiquipan military mobilization and legal maneuvering, he fails to give us a description of the whole variety of forms of gatherings and public social interaction in Namiquipa. For this reason, the communicative vehicles (the people) of this cultural struggle tend to be missing from Nugent's analysis. Land disputes are discussed, but what about the face-to-face interactions of the disputants at church, in the street, and during community meetings? Clearly the problem is not a lack of data. In one dramatic showdown drawn by Nugent from the documentary record, for example, a Namiquipan stares down Francisco Madero, the supposed leader of the Mexican Revolution, and says, "Who are you, snotnose, to order me about?" (p. 76). The Namiquipan was jailed, of course, but in this moment of personal conflict, played out as in life, the contested power of cultural struggle and the intense emotional charge of social interaction come together in a very compelling way. I would have liked to have found more of that in Nugent's book.

This is not entirely an aesthetic point. Like Foster, Nugent starts and finishes his book promising to pay more attention to people, to their concrete motivations and desires, their fears and hopes, and the consequential actions they take to live and relive their histories; but in the end he, like Foster, tends to float into abstractions. On the one hand, Foster is forced to the level of abstraction because he presents the actors in his analysis as lacking emotional connection to the symbolic contexts of the gatherings that they attend. They change their attachment to cultural signifiers without resistance or regret, and so Foster needs to introduce a structural determination to account for the social changes that have taken place within the Comanche community. For Nugent, on the other hand, we come to recognize the powerful symbols that have been contested in Namiquipa, but we do not witness the variety of concrete social interactions through which this cultural struggle occurs. Like Foster, Nugent promises to focus on concrete processes, but, because he skips over the variety of forms of social interaction in Namiquipa, the struggle over socially constituting symbols tends to take place as an abstract opposition between two ideal categories, "the people" and "the state".

Read together, however, the problems in each book cancel those found in the other. In the end, these authors have written important works that manage to identify the basic coordinates through which quite

different communities have come to understand their own particular histories. They point to the symbolic struggles and social processes through which life is lived in these places, and so both Foster and Nugent have allowed the reader to understand how these communities have managed to defend themselves as separate and enduring peoples through time.