

BUFFALO INC.

AMERICAN INDIANS AND
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
SEBASTIAN FELIX BRAUN

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American Indians and Economic Development

SEBASTIAN FELIX BRAUN

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Buffalo Inc.

Introduction

I think back and I cry for the glory of land which now becomes only a dream.

Buell Anakak from *Magic Maker*

Near Swiftbird, May 21, 2002

It was a warm May day on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation. Soon, the summer heat would arrive. On such a nice day, miles and miles of the Missouri River valley are visible from vantage points on the bluffs, the long, yellow grasses waving in the wind. In contrast to the scenes from one of Karl Bodmer's paintings though, there is no longer the meandering river lined with sandbanks and trees or the deer and birds of all colors and sizes. Instead, the cobalt blue waters of Lake Oahe now fill the valley. The lake provides an eerie contrast, a mirror for the endless skies, a reflection that underlines the starkness of the landscape. On this day, the fierce, gusty winds kicked up so much dust, one could hardly see for a mile. This dust came not only from the dried-up pastures but also from the barren lake shore. Years of drought had taken its toll on the lake's water level, and the grasses barely grew.

Sitting in pickup trucks, the wardens from the tribal Game, Fish, and Parks Department (GFPD) and I were not there to admire the scenery. We were there to do what people in Bodmer's time had done—perhaps at that very spot. We were there to hunt buffalo. The herd, led by the older cows, fled on our approach down the bluffs to the lake. We were waiting for them to calm down.

After a while, we made our way along the shoreline and crept around the bison herd. We pushed the animals toward a ravine and forced the stragglers back into the herd. On the opposite side of the herd, others, whom we could not see, crashed through the sparse bushes, intercepted calves and young bulls, and channeled the herd. When we topped the ridgeline, we could follow the movement of the bison uphill with our eyes.

On the higher slopes of a bluff, the designated shooter positioned himself. The buffalo made their way up the ravine—all four hundred of them. I could not help but think of a successful bison drive in the past, almost like the scene unfolding before my eyes.

But these buffalo were not being herded into a corral or toward a cliff. These buffalo were moving toward a shooter in an old blue Chevy pickup with an old-fashioned camping shell; the pushers worked from two white Ford Rangers. In the background, the blue tractor with its front loader out to shovel up the dead animal and carry it back to the slaughtering plant came trudging across the pasture. There was nothing romantic about this hunt. The historical hunts probably were not romantic either: they were sweaty and dangerous. What was taking place now was similar to the past in some ways. It was the same act and the same strategy of taking an animal's life for the welfare of the people; there was the same excitement of the hunt, the same cooperative effort, and the same necessity for the hunt to be successful.

The bison kept walking toward the distant truck, and the truck kept moving closer to intercept the bison, until the animals were in range. One of the young bulls presented himself as a target and was shot. The herd's steady movement was suddenly disrupted. Then, over the radio, came the confirmation, and we could see the blue truck close in on the dead animal. The truck slowly pushed away the dead buffalo's curious peers, claiming what was his.

We converged on the spot where the buffalo lay. He was a young bull, lying on his side, with all four legs stretched out in front of him. A small puddle of blood had formed on his side but was coagulating quickly. Some of the wardens nudged the bull with their boots and made some remarks about his size. The more traditional wardens grew very quiet. However, eventually, we did what was necessary. One of the wardens broke open a cigarette and rubbed some tobacco into the bull's nostrils, and we followed with a prayer.

The tractor pulled up to haul the bull back to the slaughtering facility. The bull was still warm; it had run up an incline just ten minutes ago. Small steam clouds rose from his nostrils even though it was not winter. We hooked him to the front loader with chains, and the tractor lifted him up. Although I was ahead in one of the Rangers, I knew what would happen. Usually on the ride back on the tractor, one could see the dead buffalo exhale one last time, the last breath of air escaping his body. It always seemed to me that finally, the buffalo had acknowledged his sacrifice.

The situation of Native communities in the United States has received a lot of attention over the years. Many people—scholars, activists, elders, visitors, businessmen, charlatans, and others—have contemplated the consequences of historic and contemporary policies, cultural and social organizations, col-

onization, religions, and a host of other, mostly relevant topics. This book is simply an attempt to bear witness to events that unfolded in one particular community, the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation in South Dakota from around 1990 to 2006. It gives an account of what can happen when a community decides to take its economic, cultural, and ecological future in its own hands and to control and manage what is sometimes called “development.” Specifically, I look at the Cheyenne River Sioux tribe’s efforts to build a tribally owned and operated buffalo operation.

On another level, however, that is not what this study is really about. Sidney Mintz notes that his “book on sugar is not really *about* food—it is about the rise of capitalism. Sugar (sucrose) was simply the vehicle that served as an illustrative instance of that process, a long thread in the social and economic fabric of Western history” (2003:4–5). Similarly, this work is not really about buffalo, but they serve as the vehicle to illustrate certain aspects of contemporary Lakota culture and society and to present a model of indigenous people’s efforts to gain control over their futures. The bison also serve as a vehicle, therefore, to look into issues of sustainability, economic development, sovereignty, ecology, health, representation of history, and not the least of all, the intersection of all these complex concepts: place. This is not a book about *place* in the strict sense but as Timothy Beatley says (2004:3), “[a]t the heart of this book is the belief that reconnecting to people and landscapes at the local level and having a better understanding of the built and natural surroundings in which we live will result in better, more enjoyable, healthier, and more fulfilling lives. Meaningful lives require unique and particular places.”

Although bison have always been present on American Indian reservations, since the early 1990s, reservations in the United States have been taking a more focused approach to buffalo. Communities have consciously established bison herds to reconstitute economic, ecological, political, cultural, social, and physical health. This sense of restitution originated in the symbolic importance of the animals to the communities, especially on the plains. I look at how these initiatives are playing out roughly ten years after their inception. I do this against the background of the various aspects in which buffalo have come to importance and by focusing on one tribal buffalo-raising operation, *Pte Hca Ka*, Inc., of the Cheyenne River Sioux tribe in South Dakota.

The Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation was the logical focal point for my study for several reasons, some of which became clear to me only during

my fieldwork. Pte Hca Ka, Inc., the tribal buffalo operation, had been a model operation for tribal buffalo herds for several years. Fred DuBray, the director of Pte Hca Ka since 1991, who had in essence built the program, was also one of the founders of the InterTribal Bison Cooperative (ITBC), a network of tribal buffalo operations that spans most of the United States. His hopes were not only to build a buffalo operation that would provide desperately needed jobs on the reservation but also to revive, through the buffalo, ecological, dietary, and cultural aspects of the traditional society that had guided the Lakota well before reservation life and would again guide them well in their contemporary situation. When I started my fieldwork, Michael Collins was running a buffalo management program at the tribal college in Eagle Butte, then Si Tanka College. This study program, originally developed by Jim Garrett, stressed not only the business aspects of a buffalo operation but also the past and contemporary importance of the buffalo for Lakota culture and spirituality. In accordance with this approach, which is a philosophy that respects the buffalo as a relative, Pte Hca Ka also operated the world's only mobile buffalo slaughter and processing unit, which was modeled on such units used by reindeer herders in Sweden.

In short, what a visitor could see on Cheyenne River in summer 2000 was the cutting edge of tribal bison operations, a vision to bring traditions, spiritual knowledge, economics, and ecology together and find a unique way to solve some of the problems that reservations face. It made a lot of sense to me, and I wanted to write this story: A story of innovative visions transformed into reality; a story of global resources coming together in one of the poorest regions of the northern plains to help a truly local and holistic restoration project. Above all, I wanted to write about positive results coming from an American Indian reservation. As I will explain, many things have since changed at Pte Hca Ka. Reservations are not cut off from the rest of the country or the world, and many of the same pressures that apply to outside situations are felt on the reservations. But this is still a positive story, and I sincerely hope it will continue to be one well into the future.

I have come to hold a certain approach to development, which departs from the importance of particular cultures as symbolic structures and holds that economics are intimately tied to this globally relative but locally absolute cultural system and to the political system in which all of these ongoing processes take place. In other words, I hold that an answer to the manifold problems on plains reservations—and other areas, whether indigenous or

not, that face similar issues—cannot be economic alone but must be holistic, which includes ecological, political, cultural, and spiritual restoration. I began this study in absolute agreement with George Tinker (2004:4):

As Indian people begin to identify the social dysfunction of Indian communities, it is becoming clearer to us that the healing of Indian communities is Indian business, to be conducted by Indian people and Indian community organizations in a way that is consistent with Indian culture and values.

In this vein, I was attracted to tribal bison herds exactly because the community activists who built them saw the reintroduction of buffalo herds as an attempt to liberate American Indian nations from the spiritual, economic, political, and social bounds that kept them disenfranchised. It is important to understand in this context that the reasons to rely on buffalo as the means to accomplish this were not exclusively economic: buffalo were chosen because they are traditionally seen as relatives of the Lakota and other plains societies, and the fates of people and animals are seen to be intimately linked—not in a romanticized New Age way, but in a real, genocidal politics kind of way.

Here was a chance, then, to provide an account of a project that approached concerns of the well-being of disenfranchised and colonized people from—as I am still convinced any such project should—perhaps first and foremost an approach that was embedded in liberation theology. Because of this emphasis on a holistic approach, which included a specific cultural approach, I maintain that the tribal bison operation that I came to see in the beginning of my fieldwork was an example of successful sustainable development. Some critics think that the term sustainable development “is an oxymoron” (Boff 1997:67; see also Churchill 1997:348; Tinker 2004:6). However, I think it is possible to have truly sustainable development as long as both elements of the term are seen as predominantly cultural. I come back to this point toward the end of this text.

Although the return of the buffalo to the reservation might have started as an act of liberation theology, not all people agreed with this approach. Many residents on plains reservations have no special cultural connection to buffalo anymore, and the symbolic aspects of the project were therefore of little importance to them. The people of this community—like the people of any community—do not speak with one voice, and they have different concerns

and opinions. All of these voices, however, are extremely important because they all express the opinion of this community, and none can simply be dismissed. I try to present the various voices because they are all concerned with perpetuating their culture and their identity in the contemporary context. I hold that those who argue for the importance of a primarily economic development agenda and those who have reached economic success are not “quislings,” “who have sold out their communities in order to work the system for personal gain, financially, and politically” (Tinker 2004:9, 10). In fact, I think it would be extremely detrimental to make such a judgment and dismiss these voices.

I have said that this is a positive account, and some readers, shocked by apparent conflicts (see Davis 2000:92) or left without a definite closure or solution to the problems apparent in the communities, will be confused as to why such optimism would be warranted. Let me note that my optimism comes from my understanding of these communities as local, participatory societies, and the temporary struggles of buffalo projects, such as Pte Hca Ka, as an expression of this.

Truly local cultures are often the most democratic ones. I do not wish to romanticize peasant societies or other traditional communities because conflict often brews in them. However, this is not grounds to condemn them either: Conflict is normal. I find these communities truly democratic exactly because they allow, and to a certain amount expect, conflict. Radical ideas can be voiced without fear because people accept that there will be a process of working out compromises and that this process is always ongoing. This book follows one of these processes, namely the debate over how best to integrate a society that holds certain particular cultural values into national and global economic and political contexts. This debate is not one that follows romantic notions of indigenous uniformity, and it will disappoint readers who expect that. However, historicity and complexity are taken to be self-evident in nonindigenous societies and cultures, and I would defend the same structures of conflict over resources and power in my own community as vital signs of a complex and valuable democratic tradition. We need to regard social and political debates and even conflicts not as necessarily negative patterns but as matters of course in all vibrant communities.

As Leif Vaage points out in a slightly different context, the work of cultural interpretation is “understood and conducted as one of the many social activities that either help to construct or serve to diminish the local life of particular human communities” (1997:6). What anthropologists do, hopefully, is

to look at things from different perspectives. We take information and situate it in a context that is relevant to it, or sometimes we just put it into a context that is interesting. Most of the time, we alienate the subject from its world and situate it in a context that makes it come into our world. In rare instances, we do a good job; we add something to the understanding of our subject and maybe even of the world at large. If this account fails to contribute to an understanding of the world, I do hope that it may in some way help to construct the life of this community or at the least not serve to diminish it. I want to make clear here that I am not trying to blame anybody. I do understand why the different actors in this account felt compelled to act as they did, and I recognize that they all felt they had good reasons to do so.

I am not Lakota, and I do not want to pretend in any way to speak for the Lakota. Neither do I think that my own economic, political, or spiritual preferences have any relation to Lakota culture. I have no assumption that I could, “through some innate cultural or racial superiority, [have] the ability to perceive and master the essential beliefs, values, and emotions of persons from Native American communities” (Silko in Russell 1993:161). Nor do I need to look for my own life or my own love of the earth in other peoples’ traditions (Hogan in Russell 1993:161–62). There are individuals who have a need to do that, perhaps those who feel that their own cultures cannot offer them satisfying answers to fundamental questions because they perceive, or are led to perceive, their own cultures as being not only alienated from their environment but even opposed to it. From my own perspective, there are large parts of Europe where people have lived in close connection with their land from “time immemorial.” My people have their own traditions, rituals, and ceremonies and have been performing them for centuries. Most of them can be traced to the syncretism that still underlies much of the Catholic beliefs in the rural regions of my home. European peasants have come, in this first industrial and then postindustrial world, to be overlooked, but they are still there. They have a lot in common with other nonindustrial indigenous peoples who have lived in and with the land for as long as they can remember and whose cultures have to be defended against the impact of the postmodern centers. This does not mean that I am in some sort of spiritual relationship with the oppressed people of the world. My people are still very much privileged. What I would like to make clear is that I am grounded in my people’s own way of life and traditions and have no motivations to look for salvation in others’ cosmologies.

The real experts on the things anthropologists write about are the people we work with, the people we bother. In a peripheral sense, I have been a part of the Lakota community but at the same time am not. I hope to have gained some insight into what living within a Lakota community is like; although I only lived on Cheyenne River for a short period of time, people shared their lives with me, sometimes intensely. I do not know from experience what being Lakota means, but I think I do know some things about it. I do not know more about current Lakota culture than the people who shared their ways with me. In short, this text is not about teaching people “how Lakota are,” or how anybody is supposed to be. It is my point of view, my testimony, about what I experienced and learned. As Lévi-Strauss says (1992:410–15), Buddhist meditation and Marxism lead to the same realization of holistic truth. Both are fundamentally based on practice, and I see anthropology as a middle ground between them. If anthropology is a method, as many in the discipline have said, it is based on practice, but its practice is the dialectic between, not the embracing of, either meditation or deconstruction.

Good science does not follow dogmatic guidelines; it follows a desire to explore and explain the world. The world, however, is made up of paradoxes, of which human life is one of the greatest. Science, then, has to take into account and incorporate these paradoxes, and if it explains them away, it is not good science but a cover-up. There is a difference between anthropology and travel writing and between writing science and writing a novel. The difference is that I ask you to trust me, even when I am describing my personal experience. I am not describing things the way they could have been, but the way they appeared to me, the way I understood them: The way they were. Although they might have been different for other people because there are many realities out there, I do not therefore accept the argument that there is no reality. We simply have to understand the limitations of what “reality” means. That understanding might not be a limitation at all, but rather an opportunity.

My own cultural and political values influence this account, and I do not think it would be possible to write anything that would not be influenced by them. This does not mean that the account is bad science, wrong, false, inherently skewed, or deceitful witnessing of what happened. An anthropologist who does not know or is not rooted in his or her own culture, and is therefore paradoxically always influenced by this knowledge, cannot understand other cultures. As long as we know that this influence is there

and can for that reason identify the areas in which it might lead to misunderstandings, we are able to try to be respectful of others. Colonized people, of course, might have learned long ago that such an optimistic perspective is utterly displaced and indicative of well-meaning but foolish “Westerners.” However it has been ingrained in my cultural psyche (if such a thing exists) that compromise based on cultural understanding is not only possible but necessary and that different cultures can live together peacefully and be respectful to one another.

Ethnologists have to ask themselves why they, as privileged people, think they have the right to describe underprivileged people—and we are always privileged, even if we “study up,” simply because we are the ones who describe, and they are the ones described. All anthropologists must answer that question for themselves. My own attempts can be seen in this account. It is through the generosity of the people I have worked with that they have let me ask this question of myself and have not themselves put it to me.

I grew up in a small town in Switzerland, not far from a major city, where I watched the sows being butchered, the cows being milked, and the town rapidly transforming to a suburban space. I later spent my vacations in remote locations in Scotland and North America, traveling with my tent. Mountain biking and backcountry skiing were my passions, not so much for the sport as for the experience of nature. The sacredness of places was never an empty concept for me; this came not from a romantic New Age or Deep Ecology context but from the real and direct understanding that it is but for the mercy of some unknowable forces that we are allowed to return from certain places.

I first came to Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation in June 2000 and camped on and near the reservation for two months, getting to know people and the buffalo operation. Michael Collins gave me invaluable support and sent me to the Tatanka Oyate conference, held that year at Lower Brule Reservation. He also opened a lot of doors for me, allowing me to witness things I otherwise would not have experienced and gave me the moral support to continue on this journey. Fred DuBray and Willetta Ducheneaux helped familiarize me with the buffalo operation and let me go out with the fencing crew. Wynema and Dana Dupris invited me to stay with them for the Iron Lightning Powwow that year. Many other people allowed me insights into their own lives and reservation life; acts of generosity that still leave me speechless with thankfulness and humility. I came back to visit Pte

Hca Ka for a few days in April of 2001, finding that winter can linger for a long time on the northern plains.

My fieldwork began in earnest in late August 2001. At first, I lived in a duplex behind the old Swiftbird Day School, which was at that time the offices of Pte Hca Ka. The duplex had no running water, no refrigerator, and no stove. After about two weeks and after I had proven my fortitude, people took real pity on me. I began to rent the old office, a trailer next to the mobile slaughtering unit on US 212, where I lived for the rest of my stay with Pte Hca Ka, even after the office was moved back into the trailer in November. I stayed on Cheyenne River for almost a year, with trips to other reservations on the northern plains, the bison auction at Custer State Park, the buffalo herds there and in Yellowstone National Park, and several other points of interest for my research, including local bison auctions, the National Bison Museum in Jamestown, North Dakota, and a symposium in Wyoming. During this whole year, through all the difficulties that ensued, I experienced the warmth of support and friendship from the people on Cheyenne River.

Obviously, people have more important things to do than talk with or think about anthropologists, but if one shows respect, they will consider both. It might seem odd, but my experiences in various fieldwork situations have convinced me that to be a good ethnologist, one should not ask too many questions. I tried to explain to people what I was trying to do, but I did not conduct formal interviews with a tape recorder. Respect is the method of ethnology, but it cannot just be a method. One's hosts will sense sincerity or the lack of it. After some time, when people came to trust me in a more personal manner as somebody who respected their ways of life, the exact purpose of my stay came to be less important. What seemed to matter—for opening up avenues of conversation and informal interviews—was not a trust in my professional goals but a trust in my personal integrity. I expressed my interests, and people decided what, if anything, they wanted to tell me. Other than that, I simply tried to be as helpful as I could. In the meantime, people were nice enough to let me pretend that I was not in their way. Tim Pickner, Albert (Swap) Arpan, and Chris Arpan took me along to fix fences; chase, kill, and gut buffalo; hunt deer; collect wood; and grind and package meat. The LeBeau tiyospaye invited me to Blackfoot for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Henry and Willetta Ducheneaux, Tim Pickner, and Denise LeBeau and their families invited me to their houses, and others came to talk with me, had me play pool, and took me places. The game wardens came to drink coffee, warm up, and chat.

I have since continued to talk with people on Cheyenne River and from outside the area. I need to especially mention eye-opening conversations on the practice and philosophy of tribal resource management and on Pte Hca Ka with Dennis Rousseau, the director of the GFPD, Michael Collins of United Tribes Technical College, and James Garrett, of Cankdeska Cikana Community College.

Although I am aware that the American bison is not a “buffalo” in the strict sense of the term—water buffalo or African buffalo are relatives of the bison but not very close ones—I use the terms “buffalo” and “bison” interchangeably throughout this study. There is a long tradition of the term being applied to the North American animal, and although it might not be the scientifically correct name, probably more people say buffalo than bison. It is also, perhaps, the culturally correct term. As Tim Pickner told me once, “‘bison’ is the white man’s term, ‘buffalo’ is what they are called.”

The public interest for *Bison bison* is rising, and so are the numbers of publications on buffalo. Most of these books are historical, dealing with the slaughter of the buffalo that brought them to the brink of extinction, and the subsequent recovery of the species. It is often overlooked, however, that a tradition of writing on the buffalo has existed at least since the latter part of the nineteenth century (Allen 1876; Hornaday 2002). One can find the extensive bibliography in Roe’s meticulous and still seminal study (1951). In his footsteps followed McHugh (1972), Dary (1989) and Haines (1995), all trying to paint a comprehensive picture of the history of the North American buffalo, including biological and ecological information. Rorabacher (1970) concentrated specifically on the state of the contemporary buffalo and is in that regard an exception. Sandoz (1954), on the other hand, set the trend in writing not so much the story of the buffalo as the story of the buffalo hunters.

Since the 1980s, a number of well-illustrated, popular books on buffalo have been published. There has also been a renewed interest in the history of the buffalo, including revisionist perspectives on the near extinction in the buffalo hunts (e.g., Isenberg 2001). In the context of what some perceive to be an agricultural crisis on the Great Plains and following modern ecological problems and movements, there is also a renewed interest in the fate of the region as such. The buffalo have become one of the symbolic points of focus in this discussion. The concept of the “Buffalo Commons” (Popper and Popper 1987) has spawned much response and discussion, both

directly related to buffalo (Callenbach 1996; Matthews 1992), and indirectly (Licht 1997), and it has also inspired a novel (Wheeler 1998). The controversy over the killing of Yellowstone buffalo in Montana (Christofferson 2004; Rudner 2000), the conservation of the species as such (Berger and Cunningham 1994), or the birth of white buffalo calves (Pickering 1997) have become subjects of interest in their own right. The growing “Buffalo Industry” has also sparked books on buffalo management (American Bison Association [ABA] 1993; National Buffalo Association [NBA] 1990) and first-hand literary accounts (O’Brien 2001).

Rorabacher (1970) explains the motivation behind his classical study of the renaissance of buffalo on the plains as follows: “An interest in the cultural ecology of the Great Plains led to the study of the bison; the role of the bison in the balance of life on the plains; and to the question of this book—Why do people raise buffalo today, and what is the present role of the buffalo?” It was also an interest in the cultural ecology of the plains that led me to the buffalo. The question for my research is almost the same, though a bit more specific: Why do American Indian nations raise buffalo, and what is the present role of the buffalo for American Indians?

This study looks at and partially answers a question that has been sidelined in almost all of the numerous articles and publications on the subject of buffalo and the Great Plains: Now that the buffalo have come back, what is their relation to the people whose cultures and economies had been centered around them, the American Indian people of the Great Plains? I look at the role buffalo are playing and could play in the balance of life on American Indian reservations.