



Daniel Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country*, pp.
175-79

For Indians, as for Euro-Americans, that world was knit together as an "Empire of Goods." Indeed, in many respects Native Americans experienced the full effects of the eighteenth-century consumer revolution even before most British Americans did.⁵¹ "A modern Indian cannot subsist without Europeans and would handle a flint ax or any other rude utensil used by his ancestors very awkwardly," colonial official John Stuart explained in 1761; "what was only conveniency at first is now become necessity."⁵² The list of conveniencies and necessities that tied Native Americans to transatlantic commerce was extensive. Indian country relied on trade with Europe and Europeans for items as diverse as weapons and ammunition, woolen textiles used for men's cloaks, women's skirts, and leggings for both sexes, ready-made linen shirts for men and shifts for women, vermilion and verdigris for body and face painting, tools of every kind from knives and hatchets to needles and scissors, brass kettles and pewter spoons, muskets and gun flints, jewelry, liquor, tobacco, and wampum (which in the eighteenth century was mostly turned out in Albany



Creek leaders in London, 1730: transatlantic political and economic connections displayed.
From William Verelst, *Trustees of Georgia* (1734–35). Courtesy, Winterthur Museum.

seen in any number of surviving portraits and engravings depicting eighteenth-century Native people wearing and using them—reveal the complex ways in which Indians integrated themselves into the transatlantic Empire of Goods without losing their distinct cultural identity, so too does the way the acquisition and use of those goods fit into traditional patterns of reciprocity and exchange. Traders traveling in Indian country had to pay as much attention to Native customs as did diplomats at treaty councils; moreover, they were likely to traverse routes that had been in use centuries before the Indian discovery of Europe. In form if not in function, exchanges continued to embody personal relationships, rather than impersonal buying and selling. Convivial rituals—a shared smoke, or

drink, or meal—surrounded transactions, and gift exchange, rather than haggling, remained the convention even when all parties knew that everything had its price.⁵⁵

The limited degree to which capitalist assumptions about property and accumulation penetrated early eighteenth-century Native societies is suggested by the comments of a group of Iroquois headmen on their way to a council in Philadelphia in 1736. According to Pennsylvania interpreter Conrad Weiser, the Native leaders were worried that their people, still imbued with the idea that excess goods were for the use of anyone who needed them, would simply walk off with the unattended possessions of merchants in the big city. “Those that have been in Philadelphia tell us [that] your goods lie alone . . . upon the street about the shops,” one of them said. “We desire that it may be kept in house while we are there [so that] it may be seen for all when the shop is open. We will be very careful.”⁵⁶ Expectations of reciprocity also remained strong. During the Philadelphia treaty council, an orator explained “that amongst them there is never any victuals sold, the Indians give to each other freely what they can spare.” When Pennsylvanians charged them for food, the Iroquois were deeply offended that hosts “should take money of [*sic*] this score.”⁵⁷

Such traditional economic patterns came under tremendous stress in the mid-eighteenth century. There is considerable evidence that, in many parts of Indian North America, class lines were emerging between those with greater access to consumer goods (many of whom tended to be *métis*, or “mixed bloods,” who imbibed the capitalist ethos of their Euro-American trader fathers) and those less well supplied.⁵⁸ These and other cultural implications of Native dependence on European trade, however, only entrenched Indian people more firmly in a broader narrative of eighteenth-century North American history in which British Americans also were plagued by increasing disparities of wealth and troubled by the apparent contradictions between republican virtue and capitalist acquisition. Socially and culturally, Indian and European histories lived parallel lives in the colonial world.⁵⁹

And in that transatlantic world, Indians were producers as well as consumers. In its mature phase, what we often call the “fur trade” was a complex system in which Native peoples functioned as a labor force producing a variety of commodities for European markets. Just how complex

and historically dynamic the Indian side of the trade could be is illustrated by the way in which the Creeks shrewdly exploited the changing demands of the eighteenth-century transatlantic economy. Just as the chaos of the Yamasee War threw southeastern trade networks into disarray, a series of fatal bovine epidemics struck continental Europe, creating a huge market among leather workers for North American deerskins to replace now-scarce cattle hides. The Creeks—controlling territories that, largely as a result of their own previous slave-raiding expeditions, were devoid of humans but thronging with white-tailed deer—were ideally placed to profit from that demand. And so were the South Carolina merchants who, in the mid-1730s, helped to make the new town of Augusta, Georgia, “the heart of a vast trading system that stretched from the manufacturing and commercial centers of the British Isles” to the Muscogulge country and beyond. By midcentury as many as a million deerskins a year—half of them harvested by Creeks—moved through the system.⁶⁰

Whether Native peoples provided deerskins, beaver pelts, or slaves for European markets, the changing role of Indian producers in the eighteenth-century Empire of Goods is perhaps more important than their role as consumers in helping us to appreciate the complexities of Indian economic dependence upon the transatlantic economy. Furs and hides were raw materials; their processing into more valuable finished products such as felt hats or leather goods took place in Europe. There, and in the countinghouses of a string of merchant middlemen, profits and capital accumulated while Indians merely consumed and produced. The lopsided economic relationship was captured well by an Iroquois spokesman whose commitment to traditional reciprocity did not preclude a shrewd understanding of European capitalism. The New York trading post at Oswego was “a vast advantage . . . because we can get there what we want or desire,” he told provincial governor George Clarke in 1740. “But we think, Brother, that your people who trade there have the most advantage by it, and that it is as good for them as a silver mine.”⁶¹

Silver mine or no, however, posts such as Oswego and Augusta—and the intercultural trade that they represented and that was so vital to Native Americans—were of steadily declining economic significance to Euro-Americans in the mid-eighteenth century. In the 1730s, while the deerskin trade boomed, prices of furs plummeted in oversupplied Euro-

pean markets, with devastating impacts on the northern Native peoples who relied on the trade. Even after the market for furs revived somewhat in the 1740s, the Indian trade became less important every year for the increasingly diversified economies of the British North American colonies. Although absolute exports of furs and hides from New York and Pennsylvania fluctuated around a steady average, their relative significance in the rapidly expanding economies of those two breadbasket colonies declined steadily from the 1720s to the 1740s. Furs and hides accounted for approximately 40 percent of New York’s total exports to London in the 1720s, but for less than 25 percent in the 1740s; the corresponding figures for Pennsylvania are 50 and 44 percent. Both sets of statistics ignore the rapid growth in the two provinces’ grain trade with the West Indies and other ports to which no Indian commodities were exported.⁶²

By the 1750s even the formerly booming Carolina deerskin trade was falling into a deep depression, with traders’ warehouses overflowing with hides for which there was no longer a profitable European outlet.⁶³ New France defied the pattern. Its fur shipments grew in relative importance as those of the British provinces declined, but only because diplomatic and strategic rather than economic considerations primarily motivated its largely government-controlled Indian trade, the main purpose of which was to maintain alliances with the French Father’s Native Children. In this case too, Indians were losing the political clout that comes from economic power, even as they became ever more thoroughly enmeshed in the transatlantic imperial world.⁶⁴