

American Indians: Before and After the European Invasion (Lecture no. 1)

Before the Invasion

When Europeans first came to the Western Hemisphere, virtually everywhere they ventured - from the islands in the Caribbean Sea, to the mountainous Andes of Peru, to the jungles of Southern Mexico and Central America, to the lush woodlands of Eastern North America, to the deserts of what today is the American Southwest - they encountered people whose ancestors had "discovered America" many millennia before Christopher Columbus had. (Given the Indians' longstanding presence in the Western Hemisphere, the idea that Columbus discovered America is only meaningful if viewed from a purely European perspective.) Although all of the people indigenous to the Western Hemisphere derived from common ancestors in an area of Asia now known as Siberia, in the thousands of years since their passage across the Bering Strait, their descendants had evolved into many distinct and diverse societies, most of whom had little or no contact "with - or even knowledge of - the other Indian societies in the hemisphere. Thus, while Native Americans have often been stereotyped in ways that make them all appear pretty much the same, in reality far more differences existed among the various peoples living in the Western Hemisphere than among those in Europe.

Differences between groups of Native Americans become most noticeable when comparing groups from regions with sharp differences in physical geography. Although it is important to avoid any strict geographical determinism that would view climate and terrain as the only factors shaping any given Indian society's character, specific forms of Indian social organization and cultural development seem to be particularly well-suited for certain types of physical environments. This affinity between geography and social organization might be fruitfully analyzed through comparing the tribes simplest in organization with those most complex. At one end of the spectrum would be Indians who lived in lush environments, who tended to belong to relatively small nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes or bands, and who subsisted through hunting, fishing, gathering, and, sometimes, light agriculture. At the other end would be natives who tended to live in arid climates, who belonged to settled tribes of much larger size, and who subsisted on the basis of intensive agriculture.

Nomadic Indian tribes tended to be small, in part, because compactness permitted the sort of mobility necessary for frequent travel. Yet there was also no functional advantage to having a nomadic tribe be any larger, given that, generally, very little division of labor took place in these societies. What division of labor there was usually broke down along the lines of gender: men engaged in hunting and fishing, while the women gathered nuts and berries and - in semi-nomadic societies - tended the crops. Increasing the size of the tribe would lead neither to greater specialization, nor to an overall increase in productive efficiency.

Moreover, in lush environments a relatively small amount of labor was required to allow a society to meet its material needs, and thus people did not have to be compelled to perform socially necessary labor. In much of the Northeast, for example, Indian men worked, on average, no more

than two or three hours per day. (Partly for this reason, nomadic men, with a great deal of time on their hands, tended to be far more inclined to go to war, and in fact, spent much more of their time in preparation for war, than did settled Indians.) But in a region - such as the Southwestern deserts - where the earth does not give up its fruits so easily, far more labor was required. Irrigation systems had to be built and maintained; soils had to be tilled; crops usually needed to be fertilized, and in general required much more care. Work in these climates was far more onerous. Not surprisingly, labor forces in settled societies were often created and maintained only through some sort of compulsion. In some cases, slaves were used, but more often a sort of caste system emerged in which different members of a tribe were accorded a different status or function.

Thus not only did tribes in areas with sparse vegetation and wildlife tend to be larger, they also tended to be more socially stratified. With greater stratification came less democracy. For in societies where everyone performs more or less the same function and has the same interest, political power tends to be more or less equally shared. Political leaders, or elders, in nomadic societies, therefore, were generally elected on a rotating basis in elections in which all adults participated. Democracy did not destabilize these sorts of societies as it would a sharply stratified society in which those who were forced to perform arduous labor would probably elect to be free from their burden if given the choice.

Political and social equality were greater for women in nomadic tribes as well. In many of the Northeastern tribes, such as those which comprised the Iroquois Confederation, women served as leaders. Again, part of the reason for the greater empowerment of nomadic women lies in the mode of production. Among tribes where men were often off on hunting or warring expeditions, women were often left to keep order at the encampment. To ensure continuity and stability, many of these women would become tribal leaders.

Finally, larger, socially stratified tribes tended to have more complex cultural systems. With a greater division of labor came a class of priests or wise men who devised written languages and complex religious systems. This intellectual elite claimed to have esoteric knowledge of the desires of the gods, gods who had to be appeased lest they let loose their wrath upon the world. According to the priestly class, the social order had been ordained by the gods and must neither be violated nor altered. Thus the religions that developed in settled societies tended to be mythological - like Islam, Christianity, or Judaism. Mythological religions are rooted in elaborate stories which explain the world's origins, while also prescribing how society should be organized and how people should behave. A more complex culture - in the sense of a system of signifying - developed, then, as a luxury that could be indulged in by those able to escape physical toil, while religion took on the function of justifying the inequitable social order in which the educated classes occupied a privileged position.

In nomadic societies, where social equality was the norm and exploited labor did not exist, there was no need to develop an elaborate ideological justification for exploitation and inequality. Religion in these "primitive communist" societies was only needed to make sense of the world. Nomadic tribes, thus, usually practiced a form of animistic religion, in which all things - living and

non-living - as well as natural processes - were believed to be animated by immaterial spirits. Religious practices for the nomadic tribes were organized almost solely around natural processes, whether that of the seasons or that of the female menstrual cycle. For people whose lives were so close to nature, animistic religion was best able to imbue the world with meaning and order.

Patterns of Interaction

However any given Indian society was organized, all were affected by the Europeans' arrival, or - to be more precise - their invasion, since they came uninvited. When Europeans began exploring, conquering, and settling the Western Hemisphere, they set off a process of ecological and social change that, particularly in North America, would lead to the near extinction of many of the native peoples of that continent. From the perspective of hindsight, this process clearly amounted to genocide, whether perpetrated unintentionally, as it usually was with disease, or purposely, as it was with warfare. But the story of the relations between Europeans and Indians in America is much more than a story of genocide, even though such was the most salient long-term result of contact between these two different groups. For several centuries, Europeans and Indians in North America interacted in a variety of different ways under a variety of circumstances; these two groups fought with and against each other; traded with each other; captured or enslaved one another; and even integrated into each other's societies, often through the institution of marriage. Why these relations took the form they did and how these relations affected Indian society constitutes the subject of the remainder of this essay.

In a broad sense, general differences in patterns of European-Indian relations can be detected on the basis of the national origin of European settlers in America. For example, the first national European group to land in America, the Spanish, were mainly concerned with plundering the wealth of Indians societies and then forcing the Indians to work for them, either in the mines, or through paying "tribute" - which amounted to the Indians giving the European conquerors a portion of their crop. The next group to settle in America, the French, related to the Indians mainly through the institution of trade, and in so doing, generally developed a much more sympathetic and humane attitude toward them than did the other European nations - often even marrying Indian women, and adopting Indian ways. Like the French, the Dutch also developed close trading relations with the Indians, though they tended to assimilate to Indian life less than did the French. The last group to establish itself in the Americas, the English, at times enslaved the Indians, and also engaged in significant trade with them, particularly with those tribes living in the interior regions around the Great Lakes and the Mississippi Valley, although in doing so the English generally relied on French fur trappers as intermediaries. However, the most representative way in which the English related to the Indians was simply to take their land, usually by force.

Historians have often tried to explain the general differences in these nation's strategies towards the Indians in terms of the distinct character of each of these European nations.

According to this view, Spanish authoritarianism motivated the conquest of the Indians, while the French sense of etiquette was supposedly responsible for the greater respect that the members of this nation displayed toward the Indians. Likewise, the enterprising nature of the Dutch explains

the business-like trading relations that this group established with the Indians, while in the case of the English, a general ethnocentrism constituted the key to understanding why the English had so few qualms about killing the native peoples and taking their land.

This ethno-cultural view may not totally be without merit, particularly when applied to Europeans as a whole. Clearly there were aspects of European culture - particularly Christianity - that generally shaped the way that Europeans treated Indians. All Europeans, for example, thought of the Indians as heathens and made at least some attempt to convert them. But when used to explain differences in the ways that different groups of Europeans related to the Indians, an ethnocultural interpretation is somewhat limited. Transplanted cultural traits may have played some role in determining how each of the European groups related to the Indians, but a close examination of the context of colonial America reveals that the ways in which specific national groups related to the Indians had less to do with the "cultural baggage" they brought with them than with the specific conditions - especially relations of power - under which particular groups of Europeans and particular groups of Indians confronted one another. Whether Europeans chose to treat Indians as a source for wives, trade, land or labor - or as allies - immediate needs **and** the ability, or power, to fulfill these needs were the most important factors determining this choice. In other words, we must look at the particular contexts within which different groups of Europeans encountered the Indians in order to understand why the relations between these groups took the forms they did.

While it is true that Spanish society was the most authoritarian of any of the European colonizers in America, it is likely that the Spanish tendency to dominate the Indians had its roots in more immediate and material circumstances. The Spanish ended up dominating the Indians because the former came to the Americas because they had the resources to achieve that purpose, and much to gain in doing so. Spanish conquistadors like Francisco Pizarro and Hernando Cortes brought armies who encountered wealthy Indian societies which were unable to offer much resistance, while the Spanish crown was wealthy enough to support a bureaucracy needed to enforce the *encomienda* - or tribute system. These circumstances explain far better than a vague "authoritarian" attitude why the Spanish so successfully subdued the Indians. Other nations would have probably imitated the Spanish example if they had been able to do so. The English explorer, Walter Raleigh, for example, planned to pillage and plunder North America, but was unable to find any Indians there who had accumulated anything approximating the riches of the Aztecs or Incas. Of all the European groups that landed in America, the French clearly had the best record for humane treatment of the Indians. But this treatment was less a result of any inherently French attitude than it was of the particular conditions of French settlement. French settlers in America were few in number and almost exclusively male. Unlike England, where the transition to capitalism had resulted in many people being forced off the land and deciding to emigrate, France had few countrymen who wanted to leave. Since their numbers were so few, the French in America were usually in no position to wage war against the Indians. Moreover, the French were motivated to assimilate to Indian culture by the fact that almost all the French settlers were men and thus would need to turn towards the Indians for (heterosexual) sex and wives. Perhaps even more importantly, French settlers' dependence on trade with the Indians meant that it could be advantageous for them to adapt themselves to Indian ways, as a strategy for securing trade

relations. Thus, in Canada, where all these conditions obtained, French behavior toward the Indians was generally humane and respectful.

However, where conditions were different, the French could prove themselves just as brutal as the English or Spanish. In the early eighteenth century, the French began building a permanent settlement in the lower Mississippi Valley (what today is northern Mississippi) as part of a plan to control the interior of the continent. This project brought them into conflict with the natives in the area, the Natchez. The Natchez, unlike many of the tribes in Canada, did not engage in significant trade with the French, and thus were not vital to the economy of French North America. Moreover, unlike the French settlements in Canada, a significant number of soldiers had accompanied the French settlers to the lower Mississippi colony, providing the French with overwhelming military superiority. Thus, when conflict arose between the French and Indians down South, the French colonists simply eliminated the Natchez from the area, killing many of them, selling others into slavery, and driving the rest to seek refuge with other southeastern tribes.

Like the French, the Dutch also related to the Indians primarily through trade. And again like the French, Dutch traders usually attempted to preserve amicable relations with the Indians the best they could. However, in the Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam (what today is New York City and its environs), where little trade existed between the Indians and the Dutch - but where many Dutch settlers coveted Indian land - fierce fighting broke out between the two groups. Whatever tendency the Dutch had towards business enterprise mattered little when the opportunity for land-for-the-taking appeared.

Of all the European groups, the English tended to shun the indigenous groups the most. The English settlers' proclivity to completely exclude the Indians from their society, to some extent, had its origins in the British experience colonizing the Irish during the last half of the sixteenth century. The English conquerors, who were motivated to settle in Ireland by the seeming overpopulation of their own country, justified their ruthless subjugation of the Irish by deciding that the Irish, whose manners the English considered crude and savage, were congenitally inferior to the English, even subhuman. Given their British inferiority, the Irish, must be subdued at all costs, no matter how savage the method. And because they were inferior, the Irish were to be excluded from the English "transplantations" in Ireland. This attitude of seeing the people to be colonized as inferior and uncivilized, and consequently, as people to be shunned was identical to the one which English settlers would develop toward Indians in the New World.

However, the English behavior toward both the Irish and Indians, in all likelihood, resulted less from an inherently ethnocentric attitude than it did from the fact that the English generally had little use for either group. Escaping their overcrowded nation, the English tended to migrate in large groups, creating settlements that attempted to recreate, to the greatest extent possible, the social and cultural environment they had left behind. Englishmen desired - and were able to - create a society in both Ireland and the New World solely from their own members. Other European groups, especially the Spanish, ended up integrating native peoples into their "creole" societies because they usually did not have enough of their own members - especially female members - to create a society entirely from their own stock.

Among the several English settlements, there were some important variations in Indian-white relations, a circumstance which further suggests that more than pre-existing attitudes were shaping the relations between Europeans and Indians. The Chesapeake region of Virginia and Maryland witnessed considerably more warfare between whites and Indians than did New England. But, again, the reason for this contrast lies less in any differences in the attitudes held by the settlers living in the two regions than in the differences in the particular conditions that obtained in each region. In the Chesapeake, where settlement was initially much thinner than in New England, and where the Indians were much stronger than in the North, warfare erupted much more frequently because Indians were in a position to challenge white encroachment. But in New England, most tribes found accommodation a more effective tactic than physical resistance. Physical resistance would probably have resulted in tribal extinction, as it almost did with the

Pequots, the only tribe to launch a major assault against the English in the North before 1675. Another factor that served to reduce friction between white New Englanders and Indians was the extensive trade that the Puritans carried on with the Iroquois (usually through French middlemen), which gave each side an interest in peaceful relations. In addition, the fact that animosity between different Indian groups in the North was much greater than in the South meant that New Englanders would encounter less hostility from Indians than would Southerners.

Even within particular European settlements there were often vast differences in the ways in which particular groups or individuals related to the Indians. Once again, pre-existing attitudes had little to do with these differences. Divergence in class interest often led to conflict over Indian policy, as it did in the Chesapeake in the late seventeenth century. The large landowners in this region generally wanted to preserve peaceful relations with the Indians, since many of them engaged in a lucrative trade with the local tribes. There were, however, many landless whites in the Chesapeake who wanted land. The gentry had already engrossed most of the good land in the coastal region; and with no decent land available there, landless whites began coveting the lands in the interior that belonged to the Indians. When the gentry opposed a plan by an army of small and landless farmers to wage war against the Indians - a war to be waged largely for the purposes of taking the Indians' land - the situation escalated into a uprising known as Bacon's Rebellion in which an army of landless whites came very close to taking control of the government of Virginia.*

The ways in which the Indians themselves responded to the white presence in America were determined largely by their tribes' own needs and the specifics of the situation in which they encountered Europeans. When the first English settled in Virginia, the Indians could have easily killed them off, but they did not because they saw the English as potentially useful to them. Some Indians in the Chesapeake were hoping to establish trade with the Jamestown settlers, while others were looking for allies to help them defeat their perennial foes among the nearby tribes. For all of these reasons, Indians went to the trouble of helping the English to survive, by teaching them how to grow corn and by providing them with food and other supplies while the settlers were waiting for their crop to come in.

The Impact on the Tribes

Although Indians at first hoped to benefit from the white presence in America, in the long run, white settlement led to the almost total destruction of the Indian way of life. There were four principal ways in which white settlement had this effect.

The first, both chronologically and in degree of impact was the devastation wreaked by the microbes that Europeans brought with them. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, disease reduced the indigenous population of the Americas to a fraction of its pre-Columbian level.

The second way in which white settlement led to the destruction of Indian society was through the market relations that developed between Europeans (and their descendants) and Indians. Throughout much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the market formed the primary relation connecting whites and Indians. As these trade relations developed, the Indian

* See the essay "The Dialectical Relationship of White Freedom and Black Slavery" for an elaboration on the origins and significance of Bacon's Rebellion.

economy itself was transformed from one based almost entirely upon subsistence production to one increasingly dependent upon trade. This shift had important ramifications for many aspects of Indian life.

First, the European demand for furs led Indians to trap, not for the immediate use of clothing and food - as they had done traditionally - but simply for the European goods they could obtain in return for the furs. This rapid increase in the scale of hunting led, in turn, to a depletion of the animals that were providing the furs, which not only deprived many tribes of a traditional source of subsistence, but also upset the ecological balance in much of North America, making a subsistence lifestyle ever more difficult to maintain. And once fur-bearing animals became extinct, Indians usually had nothing else to trade. And when Indians no longer had anything to market, whites then often set about trying to expropriate the land of their former trading partners.

The opportunity to trade enticed many Indian tribes to relocate their villages in order to be closer to the whites with whom they were trading. Relocation further undermined traditional Indian life, as these tribes found themselves unable to recreate familiar patterns of work, play and ritual in their new environment.

The market also introduced alcohol into Indian culture, turning many Indians into alcoholics, while simultaneously producing chaos and misery among many native tribes. Young Indian men addicted to alcohol would often steal from other tribe members to support their habit, while Indian women turned to prostitution to support theirs. This alcoholism occurred for several reasons. First, since alcohol had never been a part of Indian culture, most Indians never acquired genetic traits that would have helped them resist alcohol addiction. But alcohol addiction was also encouraged by Europeans who could then economically exploit the Indians' need for alcohol. Alcoholism was also the result of Indians seeking comfort through intoxication from the destructive changes that Europeans had wrought on Indian society. But indulgence in alcohol, in the long run, would only accelerate these destructive changes by further weakening Indian society and by increasing Indians' dependence on Europeans for alcohol.

Trade also intensified conflict among tribes which were competing with each other for the European trade. Moreover, trade with Europeans inclined the Indian tribes to forge alliances with Europeans instead of with one another since they each wanted the goods that the Europeans had to offer. Even though the Indians probably saw that the whites were simply playing the tribes off one another, the natives continued to forge alliances with the Europeans. Addiction to European goods induced many tribes to risk extinction. In South Carolina, trade between Indians and whites quickly led to an Indian slave trade in which different tribes would wage war against one another for the purpose of taking captives to be sold into slavery.

A third way in which white settlers contributed to the destruction of Indian society was simply through encroaching on Indian lands. The most significant part of this process would not begin until the last half of the eighteenth century, and it would not be until almost the end of the nineteenth century that all of the tribes would be confined to the reservations where many of them continue to live today. But the settlement of Europeans on lands (that Indian tribes had traditionally used, even in the seventeenth century, often had a serious impact on these tribes' way of life as they found their homes, their burial grounds, and their sources of subsistence taken from them.

The last way in which white settlement led to the destruction of Indian society was through the wars that occurred between different tribes, weakening them, often killing off a tribe's most formidable members. Attempting to fight the white man with technologically inferior weapons, the

Indians (who were almost always superior warriors) won few of these battles. Yet there was probably no other recourse for most Indians, other than to resist white civilization the best they could. For the Indian and the European-American way of life were totally at odds with one another. Indians in Eastern America were, for the most part, hunter-gatherers whose relationship to their natural environment was one of respect; nature could be utilized, but only in ways that did not upset the ecological balance. One pre-condition for the Indian's ecological lifestyle was a vast amount of land. The Europeans who settled in America, on the other hand, were determined to both appropriate and exploit the natural environment at any cost. By the nineteenth century, as we shall see, white society would demand that the vast natural resources that existed on this continent be exploited for the purposes of capitalist profit, resulting in the elimination of the material basis of the Indian's culture.

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