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Fur Production as a Specialized Activity in a World System: Indians in the North American Fur Trade

P. NICK KARDULIAS

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the economic and social impact of the fur trade on Indian cultures, in an effort to illuminate further the nature of Indian-white relations from the sixteenth through the early nineteenth centuries. As such, the paper, which may be of interest to anthropologists, historians, and archeologists, contributes to the literature on culture contact.

The Indian role in the fur trade can be described as a craft specialization. Craft specialization is often treated as an indicator of cultural complexity that develops as a response to a variety of influences. In this case, I posit the development of the activities associated with the fur trade into a specialization, resulting from Indian intensification of existing practices but stimulated by economic emoluments offered by the European market. The model for discussing this economic network draws on the work of several scholars.

The fur trade can perhaps be best understood as one segment of a world-system. Wallerstein points out that even small-scale economies in remote parts of the world are often tied into international exchange networks;¹ fluctuations in prices, supplies, and demand at the more developed end of the system (i.e., European market economies) will reverberate throughout the system. I

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suggest it is inaccurate to describe native groups tied into this Euro-American network as operating at a subsistence level in a traditional economy.

World-Systems Theory

Wallerstein describes a world-system as one of two true social systems (the other is the small, isolated society with an autonomous mode of subsistence, e.g., the !Kung San foragers of the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa), because it is self-contained and its developmental dynamics are largely internal. World-systems “. . . are defined by the fact that their self-containment as an economic-material entity is based on extensive division of labor and that they contain within them a multiplicity of cultures.”²

Wallerstein distinguishes between two types of world-systems: world-empires and world-economies; the difference is the presence in the former of a single political structure over a vast area. Capitalism provided stability to the modern world-economy that emerged in the fifteenth century, offered a venue for interaction among a number of nation-states, and furnished the means for constant expansion of the European world-system. Furthermore, the operation of a world-economy requires the presence of core-states and peripheral areas. Core-states exhibit complex political structures (stratified class systems with large bureaucracies) and, by means of superior technology, control the major facilities of production, transportation, and communication. Political organization in peripheral areas is at the pre-state or incipient state level and is relatively weak compared to that in core-states. Core-states incorporate peripheral areas into the capitalist world-economy, because these peripheral regions often contain important natural resources. European core-states controlled the division of labor and reserved those tasks that required a higher level of ability and capital investment for the higher-ranking area, i.e., Europe itself. Through political and economic control of the system, Wallerstein contends, core-states exploited the labor and material resources of peripheral areas and received a disproportionately large share of the surplus or benefits. European nation-states competed among themselves for control of or access to peripheral areas in order to increase profits.³ The rivalry among Europeans for North American furs was an element in this continual struggle for core-

area supremacy and the economic benefits that accrued to this status.

Wallerstein's image of the emergent world-economy and the relationship between core-states and peripheral areas provides an excellent model of European expansion in the early modern period. By presenting incorporation into a world-economy as largely unidirectional, however, Wallerstein oversimplifies a complex process. Hall, among others, argues that one must study the local conditions in peripheral areas as well as the capitalist economy in core-states in order to understand fully the nature of incorporation as a variable phenomenon. Hall notes that incorporation into a world-economy is a matter of degree and that non-state peripheral societies play a more active role than has generally been believed.⁴ The examination below of the Indian role in the North American fur trade demonstrates the critical part played by societies in peripheral areas in the process of incorporation into the European world-economy.

Decision Models and Craft Specialization

Many scholars have discussed culture contact between whites and Indians in colonial North America and offer additional variables to consider in a cultural interaction model. In addition to Hall, Wolf⁵ has made significant recent contributions to this issue; the two authors make several important general points:

1. Early Indian-white relations had a great impact on Indian economic and social organization.
2. This influence was mediated through an expanding world-economy.
3. Indians were active participants in the interaction. In most contact situations, regardless of discrepancies in levels of economic and/or political sophistication between the societies in question, decision-making is a bilateral process.

This paper addresses these same points, but in greater detail than Wolf and Hall could attempt in their more general treatments. The study concentrates on the fur trade as a critical fulcrum in Indian-white contact. Craft specialization is the conceptual hinge on which this discussion turns, because I view specialization as the native response to exposure to the international market system; Indians attempted to exploit the European commercial network. The development of the fur trade into a

craft specialization was a response by native peoples to contact with the European economic system, which had the ability to absorb tremendous amounts of goods and labor and to reciprocate with a multitude of manufactured items. Thus, the fur trade is an example of the evolution of specialization in a non-state society as a response to the intrusion of a world-system, but with the affected people facilitating the process in order to acquire the benefits of the network. In the long run, the distribution of benefits was unbalanced in favor of European core-states. In addition, intensification and specialization of fur production degraded many local ecosystems and fostered changes in Indian societies.

To explain the emergence of specialized production of furs among Native Americans, I subscribe to a decision model based on rational choice. The model draws on the work of Frederik Barth and George Homans for theoretical substance. Barth's study of political organization in the Swat Valley of northern Pakistan indicates the degree to which individuals seek personal advantages through the manipulation of available options: "Thus the authority system—in terms both of the relations of dominance and submission and of the alignment of persons in groups—is built up and maintained through the exercise of a continual series of individual choices."⁶ Homans explains social behavior as a system of exchange in which people attempt to maximize the goods, both material and non-material (e.g., prestige and status), that they acquire in their interactions with others.⁷ These scholars and others argue that most people operate on the basis of a rational calculus when they make decisions concerning any aspect of their existence.

A basic assumption underlying this study is that all people are motivated to a significant degree by self-interest and that they assign, in the words of the formalist economists, "scarce means to alternative ends."⁸ Such economizing behavior requires individuals to weigh the costs of some action against the benefits and to select the option that maximizes the rewards. The decision any individual makes is rational in that he or she tries to satisfy some perceived need. For North American Indians, perceived needs included the acquisition of European products and the development of alliances with Europeans to serve native concerns. This process of decision-making applies both to Western and non-

Western peoples and thus provides a standard reference point from which to assess the behavior of all humans.

Negotiation and maneuvering by both sides characterized the fur trade from the outset. The role of Native Americans was critical to the success of the fur trade, but this part was not an isolated phenomenon. The Indian role, influenced as it was by the desire to obtain Western goods, required modifications in various native practices to permit full exploitation of the network. Indians altered production strategies to suit their own perceived interests. They engaged in procurement, processing, and use/consumption activities that were embedded in the procurement sphere of the European market. Indian involvement in the fur trade was a microcosm of the larger (i.e., world-system) network (Figure 1).

Structural changes occurred in native societies to facilitate such shifts in economic emphasis and involved the development of craft specialization. The relationship between craft specialization and cultural complexity is not clear. Some authors argue that specialization is a feature of state-level society, but various studies indicate that the matter is much more variable. I will argue that the fur trade constituted a craft specialization for Indian societies at band to chiefdom levels of organization. Native Americans exhibited an entrepreneurial spirit in manipulating the system to their advantage and, in so doing, adopted specialized economic behavior. Yet, this activity did not necessarily presage a move towards state-level organization. In fact, Native American societies exhibited remarkable flexibility in adopting, absorbing, and manipulating European goods and practices within an Indian context. Social practices, kinship structure, and other elements felt the impact of the fur trade, but the agenda for change was an Indian one, despite the inability of native groups to foresee the ultimate catastrophic effects of this involvement.

To elaborate, specialized production is commonly ascribed to state-level societies. Archeologists and economic historians have dealt with this problem and often list craft specialization as a characteristic of civilization. Of course, many scholars realize such activities must have had origins in pre-state societies as part-time activity. The ethnohistoric record provides evidence for a degree of specialization not only at the advanced chiefdom level, but also in hunting and gathering groups with a low degree of

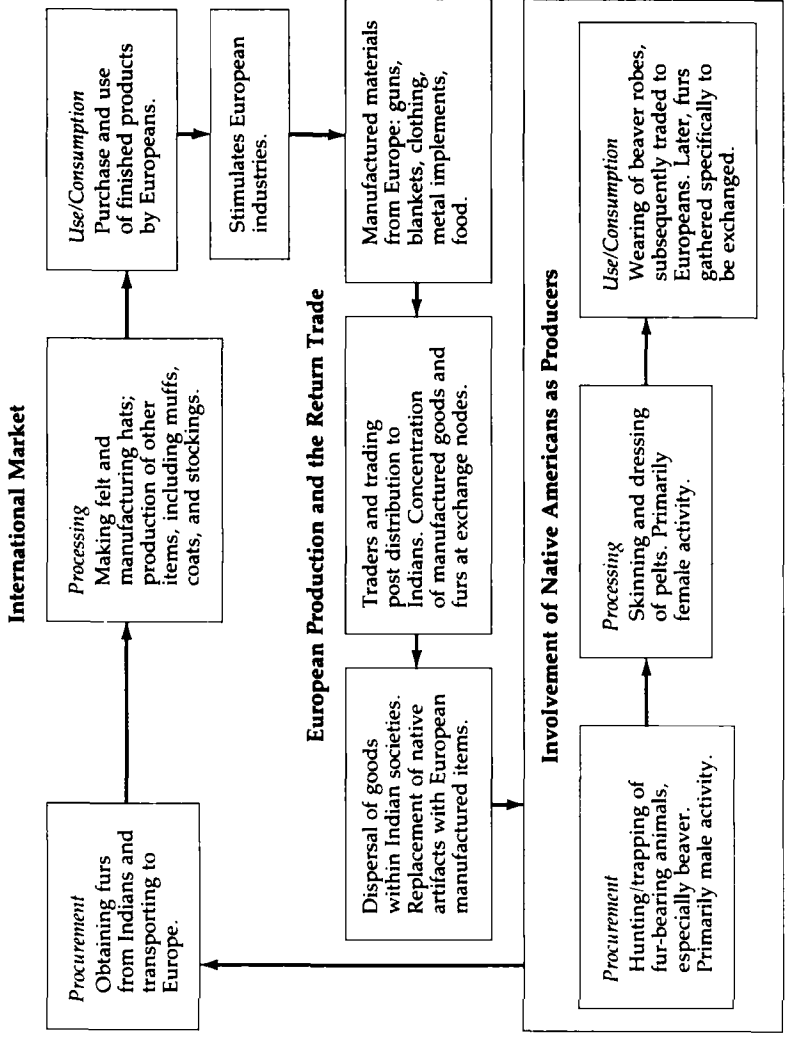


FIGURE 1. The Role of Native Americans as an Embedded Feature of the European World Economic System

political integration in North America. One can argue that specialized production is not a necessary prerequisite to state development, but is stimulated by contact with a state-level society.

The North American fur trade offers an opportunity to examine the process of engaging a native culture in a world-system. The process becomes manifest in the development of the fur trade as a craft specialization. The problem of defining craft specialization and examining the ethnohistoric record for its presence is critical to this endeavor. Recent work by Robin Torrence⁹ on the exploitation of obsidian quarries in the Aegean suggests two traits that should be present where specialization exists:

1. Restricted access to the resource area (e.g., quarry, hunting territory). This permits a group to regulate the production, distribution, and consumption of some commodity and will occur only when it is important to concentrate on resource procurement or preservation.
2. The need for efficiency if a commercialized system is involved. The profit motive that drives a commercialized system necessitates the most expeditious use of the resources at hand in order to derive maximum benefits. Efficiency dictates that there be a variety of alternative modes in the same exchange system. Both of these traits are evident in Native American cultures involved in the fur trade.

To undertake such a study requires the listing of certain specific traits of the population under scrutiny. For example, it is of critical importance to distinguish between cases in which an increasing tendency toward specialized production is due largely to internal factors (environment, demographics, etc.) or to external elements (culture contact). In each case, the impetus for and degree of change varies. What is constant in both situations is the realignment or readjustment of the economic structure and its social correlates to meet the altered circumstances. In the case of culture contact, both societies make decisions as to the economic avenues to be pursued. The lone exception to this pattern is when contact leads to the subjugation of one culture by another, thus precluding or at least limiting the range of choice for the subservient group.

The term *specialized production* requires clarification. When one is discussing a purely indigenous development, specialization can be defined as non-subsistence activity which is performed

by a particular or restricted number of households within a community; the individuals in such households then exchange their products or services for foodstuffs and items produced by other specialists. Such conditions may also exist or be created in a contact situation, but specialization may take another form under such circumstances. When the contact is between societies at different levels of socioeconomic development, the group which is commercially more advanced may provide incentives and opportunities that were previously unavailable to the less developed economy. In this way, trade opportunities engendered by outside contacts may induce specialization.

Depending on the size of the more advanced economy and the kinds of incentives it can provide in the form of technologically superior products, the peripheral group may increasingly turn to specialization as a means of maximizing returns for work expended. If this latter society possesses only rudimentary forms of hierarchical ranking, specialization may develop as a community-wide phenomenon rather than as a means of distinguishing between households. Although it may seem paradoxical to refer to an activity as specialized when it is conducted by most members of a small society, the larger framework provides the key. The activity is specialized within the context of the world-system, often as the means for acquiring a key resource, and it also represents a process of intensification in the context of the impacted group. If in performing this activity, the members of the smaller society reduce the time spent in subsistence tasks, there must be a way to make up the difference in food procurement. Usually trade with the new foreign element or increased contacts with traditional suppliers provides the necessary foodstuffs. In short, specialization may encompass an entire community or small society and act as one arm of a complex, diversified foreign market economy (i.e., the European world-system). As such, craft production involves a particular knowledge and set of tools, and a unique lifestyle.

The inference is that the specialist offers some product or service which is his/her particular domain, due to peculiar skills, knowledge, or aptitudes. Although specialists can exist in foraging societies, they perform only on a part-time basis in such situations, because all able-bodied persons must contribute to the food quest.¹⁰ However, since specialization enhances productive

efficiency, perhaps the degree of homogeneity in this regard among simpler societies has been unduly emphasized. A more penetrating assessment might stress the degree or potential development of specialized production and its underlying correlates.

It is within this general framework that the Indians' production of furs for the European market is examined in this study. The primary contention is that, as a result of contact with whites, the acquisition of furs became the main focus of native economies. In this process, various Indian groups were not just passive recipients of European influence, but rather exercised the ability to select from among the options with which they were presented. Especially among the hunting and gathering societies of eastern and central Canada and the northern United States, the choice was most often to invest heavily in the hunting and trapping of fur-bearing animals, the beaver in particular. A number of horticultural groups also opted to pursue this route. This activity makes sense as a specialization only in relation to the European market which generated the demand for furs. In this way, the Indians became crucial members of an international economic system; they were, in fact, the productive source and thus an indispensable element in the system.¹¹ Although they did not actually manufacture the ultimate product utilized by European consumers, Native Americans did provide a semi-finished item which vastly facilitated the process. For Europeans, especially the English, some New World products, such as furs, were important not only for domestic consumption but also as items in the re-export trade.¹²

To understand why the Indian role in fur production is deemed a specialization, one must view it on two levels. Within the wider perspective of the international economic scene, Indians fulfilled the role of procurement specialists. They acquired the raw materials that were subsequently transformed into finished commodities in Europe, then distributed and consumed on that continent. In this scheme, the Indian was one cog in a highly diversified economic mechanism. On another plane, this procurement sphere encompassed acquisition, processing, and consumption activities of its own, quite apart from the final disposition of furs in Europe. Natives captured the fur-bearing animals, dressed the pelts, and utilized the skins for immediate utilitarian or trade purposes. However, this series of activities did not take on the

stature of specialization until the trade with Europeans began. European demand stimulated the harvesting of furs at an unprecedented rate and diverted attention from traditional subsistence activities. This trend gained momentum during the entire history of the fur trade and engendered significant modifications in native societies.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SYSTEM

Native Groups in the Fur Trade

From the outset of the fur trade in the sixteenth century, Europeans encountered a diversity of native groups. In general the various societies can be divided into hunters and gatherers on one hand and horticulturalists on the other, although there was some overlap in modes of subsistence. Among the former were the Micmac, Montagnais, Nipissing, Cree, and Chipewyan, while key among the latter were the Huron, Iroquois, Illinois, Ottawa, Arikara, and Mandan. Contact with these groups was spread over a period of more than three centuries.

Rather than concentrate on one group at a specific time, this study follows a diachronic approach to demonstrate the fairly consistent response native groups had to involvement in the fur trade. Most of the concentration is on the Northeast and Great Lakes Indians, with other groups considered wherever they contribute to the discussion.

The Micmac and Montagnais are fairly representative of the foraging cultures of Algonkian-speakers who inhabited the eastern provinces of Canada and the region around the St. Lawrence River. These groups engaged in seasonal migration. In the winter, they went inland or upstream to hunt moose, caribou, beaver, and other game. They spent the warmer months fishing along streams or gathering shellfish on the coast. Patrilineal bands formed the key social units that would divide up or congregate, depending on the exigencies of the food quest. In general, they exhibited strong communal patterns in hunting and social organization. Informal political authority rested with individuals gifted with natural talents for hunting and leadership. As in most societies of this nature, division of labor followed gender lines, with males engaging in hunting and fishing and women

involved in the whole range of domestic tasks that included the dressing of skins.¹³

In the area east of the Great Lakes, the major horticultural societies that became involved in the fur trade were the Iroquois and Huron. Both of these Iroquoian-speaking groups lived in substantial settlements with bark longhouses and wooden palisades. In 1600, the Huron probably numbered 25,000–30,000 in the region between Georgian Bay and Lake Simcoe in Ontario. Among the Iroquois, one Cayuga village had about 2,000 residents in 1669. Swidden horticulture, with the cultivation of corn, beans, and squash, supported substantial populations. The Huron planted enough each year to provide a three- to four-year food supply, to make up for any poor harvests. A similar practice seems to have held sway among the Iroquois; one observer recorded cornfields stretching two miles out from a large Onondaga settlement.¹⁴ This pattern extended in some respects to the western Great Lakes, where, among the Fox, women planted and harvested crops; gathered wild plant foods; made pottery, clothing, mats, baskets, and bags; cooked; and cared for the children. Men cleared the fields; made tools, weapons, and canoes; hunted; participated in warfare and major religious activities; and held positions of authority.¹⁵ Strategies for hunting beaver varied. The Huron remained fairly close to their villages, while the Iroquois migrated considerable distances from their settlements on a seasonal basis.¹⁶ Political organization reached its most sophisticated level among the Iroquois, the strength of whose confederacy enabled them to raid successfully the Huron, Illinois, Erie, and Cherokee.¹⁷

Fur as a Resource and Its Exploitation

Animal furs were the subject of Indian exploitation before Europeans arrived in North America, but the advent of the latter spurred the production of pelts to an unprecedented degree. This trade began in the early sixteenth century, with French and Basque fishermen exchanging metal artifacts for the furs.¹⁸ Eventually, the skins of a variety of animals (bears, moose, deer, marten, fox, various felines, and, later, buffalo) became involved in this traffic, but the most important by far for over two hundred years was the beaver. The largest North American rodent, the beaver was once widespread throughout much of Canada and

the northern United States. The habits of this aquatic mammal preoccupied not only the aboriginal hunters but also the European newcomers. Among others, Father Paul le Jeune described the habitat of the beaver as he witnessed it in the 1630s.¹⁹ Writing in the 1680s, Baron de Lahontan was amazed at the sixty beaver ponds he encountered in a journey of sixty miles.²⁰

In terms of physical characteristics, beavers exhibited some general similarities over their range of distribution, but also significant variation, depending on the climatic regime in the various areas they inhabited. Size was fairly consistent, but the quality of the fur declined from north to south.²¹ In the summer, colonies of fifty to one hundred would gather at streams to construct dams and lodges. The beaver spent most of the winter in these lodges, venturing out only occasionally to supplement the diet of stored bark and wood with fresh items.²²

The interest Europeans exhibited toward the beaver was not simply zoological. This animal was known to possess exceptionally fine fur, but the European variety of beaver was practically extinct in Western countries by the 1500s, with only limited supplies available from Russia and Scandinavia.²³ The fur is composed of two layers: (1) an outer layer of rather stiff guard hairs, each about two inches long and hollow to provide insulation and prevent the fur from becoming waterlogged; this part is coarse and shiny and gives the animal its color; (2) a fine, thick, downy undercoat, with individual hairs one inch long; these hairs have tiny barbs that make the fur cling tightly together when it is matted, as in the production of felt for hats.²⁴ It was the latter feature that made beaver fur the ideal form for hat manufacture, and accounted for its immense popularity.

From the European perspective, American furs, in particular that of the beaver, possessed several virtues: (1) They represented a commodity in short supply in Europe; (2) because of their light weight, they offered high value relative to bulk, could be readily packed and transported, and, as a result, were highly profitable (early in the trade, a manufactured item worth one livre could be exchanged for a beaver robe that sold for two hundred livres in France, a fact that indicates the disparity in the distribution of gains in the world-economy); (3) Indians performed most of the work, including delivery of prepared furs to European settlements; an economic partnership developed between the two parties involved in such transactions.²⁵

Material Cycle

This series of events involved the procurement, processing, and use of furs. The procurement aspect of this cycle refers to the hunting of fur-bearing animals. This activity generally occurred from mid-autumn to early spring, a time when animal furs were in prime condition. As the principal source of high-grade fur, the beaver was an object of Indian hunting in the precontact period, although not to the same extent as during the historic era.

Various ethnohistoric accounts record the hunting techniques. In the fall, a common method was to breach a beaver dam to drain the pond and eliminate underwater escape routes. The various Canadian Indian hunters would spare about a dozen animals to serve as breeders; then they would repair the hole in the dam.²⁶ But by the late seventeenth century, the Indians killed as many animals as possible. The shift may reflect deeper involvement in the fur trade and the necessity to have pelts to exchange for European goods. During the winter, Indians employed several different individual and group hunting techniques. Natives used nets, clubs, ice chisels, harpoons, and dogs, in isolation or in various combinations, to detect and dispatch beavers.²⁷

Further west, Indians employed similar techniques. The Hidatsa conducted communal hunts in the upper reaches of the Missouri River drainage. The hunters sent the carcasses downstream on rafts to the women, who skinned the animals. In one day, three ponds worked in this manner yielded fifty-two beavers.²⁸ Among the other methods used in the precontact period were still-hunting and the dead-fall trap.²⁹

In later phases of the fur trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, both Indian and white trappers made extensive use of steel traps.³⁰ The primary bait in this period was castoreum, derived from the beaver's castor gland.³¹ The efficiency of such traps helped to increase the number of animals taken and hastened the virtual eradication of some species. Such trapping is an example of intensification geared to maximum exploitation of the available resources and was clearly an economic decision taken by both Indian and white hunters.

In a general economic sense, this hunting phase represents the extraction of a raw resource. Prehistorically and to a degree after contact, fur-bearing animals such as the beaver also served as

important parts of the native diet,³² but when Indians shifted to full involvement in the fur trade, these animals became more than just a food item. Fur became the medium of exchange by which Indians received valued European products.³³ The Jesuit le Jeune quoted an Indian who put the issue in this light: "The Beaver does everything perfectly well, it makes kettles, hatchets, swords, knives, bread; and, in short, it makes everything."³⁴ This statement demonstrates the native realization that a concentration on beaver hunting could provide substantial economic rewards; in this sense, the emphasis on fur hunting became a specialized activity. Individuals known to be superior hunters of particular animals were called on to exercise their talents. This extractive part of the process was almost exclusively a male occupation. On rare occasions, netting of beaver could become a family affair.³⁵ By the nineteenth century, trapping was entirely male work. During the winter, men would tend the trap lines alone or in the company of other hunters.³⁶

The second phase of the material cycle involved preparation of the fur. This was largely the duty of Indian women.³⁷ Men might do the skinning, but women commonly performed this activity. Indians skinned otter, marten, mink, and ermine by the closed technique (i.e., the skin was pulled over the head). They skinned beaver in the open manner, with a central incision along the belly.³⁸

The fur could be treated in several ways. Generally it was stretched tightly over a circular willow frame, on which it dried for a day or so without exposure to the sun. A worker subsequently scraped the flesh side to remove all tissue and fat, and placed the pelt on a stretcher to cure; storage in a cool, dry place followed, to await transportation.³⁹ In the Great Lakes region and the area to the east, the pelts often received additional treatment. The Naskapi used a scraper made from the heel bone of a deer to remove the attached muscles, ligaments, and fat; when separated from the skin, the muscle formed a kind of vellum which, when dried, was used as a wrapper for bundles of furs or dried meat.⁴⁰ To make the skin pliable, native tanners often smeared the flesh side with a paste made of decomposed animal brains and liver, set the pelt aside for several hours, and then vigorously rubbed it between the hands. This latter treatment was a common means of tanning various kinds of hides throughout North America.⁴¹ Calcareous soils, bone dust, or flour served as absorb-

ing agents to remove this paste and to eliminate any excess moisture and remaining fat.⁴²

Workers cut the prepared pelts into rectangular shapes and sewed between five and eight of these pieces together with moose sinew to make a robe. Natives wore this garment with the fur next to the body during the cold months and fur side out at other times. After extensive wearing for fifteen to eighteen months, the guard hairs, whose deep roots had been loosened by the scraping, dropped out and left only the downy fur or cotanne. In addition, the skin and fur became well greased through contact with the body oil of the wearer, while the smoky interior of the Indian hut acted to cure the pelt. Because of this conditioning and the lack of guard hairs, such fur robes were ideal for the felting process used by European hat makers.⁴³ The first European traders simply bartered for the old robes the Indians had worn for some time, and, for their part, the natives were more than willing to exchange an old garment for precious metal artifacts.⁴⁴ In the minds of the Indians, they were getting the better end of the exchange.

As the fur trade developed, Indians increasingly focused on trapping in an effort to meet European demand for fur and thus obtain the valued manufactured commodities in return. Since not all of the furs could be treated in the elaborate manner of the robes, a system of grades developed, which, though framed in terms of European standards, Indians clearly understood. *Castor gras d'hiver* was the top rank fur that had undergone the whole treatment and so was devoid of guard hairs and was well greased and supple. Indians prepared *castor sec*, or parchment beaver, by drying; it still had guard hairs because it had not been worn. *Deni-gras d'hiver* referred to robes that the natives had just begun to wear, so the skin had not turned completely yellow. *Castor gras d'été* were robes made of pelts that had less fur and thicker skins, because the animals had been taken in summer. *Castor veule* robes had been scraped thin and treated, but had not been worn. *Castor sec d'hiver*, or *bardeau*, were skins taken in winter but not made into robes due to holes and imperfections; these were poorly prepared and rather coarse. *Castor sec d'été* had been trapped in summer and were not made into garments. Finally, *mitaines* and *rognures* were small pieces used for sleeves and mittens in native apparel.⁴⁵

Indians flooded the market with the lesser grades of furs as

they intensified their concentration on trapping as a major economic pursuit.⁴⁶ European hatters needed a 3:1 ratio of *castor gras d'hiver* to *castor sec*, but a huge surplus of the latter developed, since it was much more expedient for the Indians to produce this type. This imbalance is reflected in the records of Fort Frontenac: in 1722, the French received 4,435 pounds of dry beaver (*sec*) and only 168 pounds of fat beaver (*gras*).⁴⁷ The stockpiles had reached such levels by 1700 that prices dropped, a situation certain French merchants tried to remedy by burning some of their stock.⁴⁸ This sequence of events indicates that Indians regulated production levels of fur in terms of their own economic interests. Native attempts at such manipulation seem to have been effective into the early part of the eighteenth century.

Furs and fur-bearing animals continued to have an important role in postcontact Indian societies. Beaver meat was a favorite food for many groups, and the animal's incisors were used as woodworking tools.⁴⁹ Besides being used to make beaver robes, these pelts were given as wedding gifts among the Illinois,⁵⁰ and as presents to establish good relations by various Canadian Indians.⁵¹ However, there can be little doubt that by the mid-seventeenth century, the vast majority of beaver and other fur being trapped by Indians was being funneled into the trade with whites.

Native Americans as Traders

The consumption aspect of the material cycle for the Indians involved the exchange of the processed furs for European goods. Native groups were by no means strangers to trading activity. Archeological evidence indicates that long-distance indirect trade throughout eastern Canada and the northeastern United States was well developed prior to the arrival of Europeans.⁵² Similar conditions existed in the northern Plains prior to the arrival of French traders in the eighteenth century.⁵³ With such a system in place, all that was needed to spur the development of intensive fur-gathering by Native Americans was a large market and desirable goods in exchange, both of which Europeans provided.⁵⁴ The existing trade networks could readily tap a vast hinterland in which the natives turned to fur production on a large scale once they realized the advantages of trade goods. As

a result of this native exchange system, many Indian groups acquired European products well before any direct contact with whites. The Huron, who were at the center of an extensive exchange system with connections in all directions, received their first European goods from their Algonkian trading partners prior to 1603, before Champlain's first visit to the region.⁵⁵ The Chipewewa of Lake Superior were already familiar with European products when the Jesuits made initial contact with them in 1641.⁵⁶ From the outset, the Indians' role in the fur trade was instrumental in the success of the system. Not only did the natives trap the animals and prepare the furs, but they also transported the pelts to collection points, such as the trading posts.

Native involvement in the trade took two forms. At the most rudimentary level, the various Indian groups could present their furs directly to the European traders. This was the situation when Indians initially encountered Europeans in the St. Lawrence region and in the coastal areas of the Maritime Provinces. The cod fishermen who came ashore to dry their catch bartered for the furs that the Montagnais, Micmac, and other hunting groups had collected themselves. So accustomed were the Indians to this trade by 1534 that when Jacques Cartier sailed into the St. Lawrence in that year, the Micmac enticed the French to trade by waving furs at the explorers.⁵⁷ As Europeans penetrated the interior, they met still more groups who provided furs.⁵⁸ The Europeans' need to maintain a large volume of business to cover their high transportation costs motivated this inland movement. The seemingly insatiable European demand for furs led Indian groups to concentrate on the hunting of fur-bearing animals to a much greater degree than they ever had prior to contact. As a result, traditional hunting grounds were quickly trapped out, and Europeans moved further afield in search of new Indian sources.⁵⁹ Many native groups learned, to their dismay, that the network they had willingly entered abandoned them when the furs ran out.

The second native form of involvement was an outgrowth of the declining population of fur-bearing animals in certain areas, combined with the desire of the Indians in such areas to continue the flow of trade goods. The major solution to the problem was to continue supplying the Europeans with furs by acting as middlemen. In this capacity Indians exploited the already existing trade networks. The middlemen concentrated on acquiring furs

and then passed on some of the European materials to their native trading partners. Since the best quality furs were found in the cold regions north of the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes, those groups that had regular contact with the northern hunters were in an enviable position.

In the first half of the seventeenth century, the Huron were the dominant middlemen in the French fur trade. Having rapidly exhausted the beaver supply in their home territory, the Huron used their considerable skills as traders to maintain the flow of manufactured products. They exchanged corn, tobacco, nets, and European goods for furs with northern groups such as the Nipissing.⁶⁰ The Huron transported furs in large canoe convoys to French settlements on the St. Lawrence River. In this manner the French received from the Huron ten thousand pelts annually, an amount that comprised one-third to one-half of the total.⁶¹ When these people succumbed to Iroquois attacks in 1650, the Ottawa quickly filled the gap as suppliers. This same pattern repeated itself again and again as whites progressed further west. When first contacted, Indian groups focused intensively on fur trapping as a specialized means of obtaining foreign materials. When the Indians exhausted their local supply, they would attempt to maintain the trading structure by becoming middlemen or expanding their territorial control in an effort to tap new sources. The importance of Indian middlemen is reflected in the fact that at some Hudson's Bay Company forts, natives provided 70 percent of the furs.⁶²

Another persistent feature of this system throughout its history was the active encouragement whites provided. Europeans urged Indians to trap fur-bearing animals even at the expense of time that could have been used in traditional subsistence activities.⁶³ It is clear that whites depended on Indians, whose talents in hunting, preparing pelts, and transporting the furs fueled the trade into the nineteenth century. This was especially true in the early years. Before 1630 there were only one hundred Frenchmen in Canada on a permanent basis at any one time.⁶⁴ These few men depended on the productive capacity of the natives to satisfy the large European demand. There was a similar reliance in New England. The fortunes of Plymouth were closely tied to furs and to natives' ability to supply this commodity, from the inception of the colony.⁶⁵

Since Indians expended much time and effort in capturing,

processing, and trading furs, they must have felt the remuneration in manufactured goods was appropriate. Indeed, what may be called the trinket theory of Indian-white trade, which presumes that Europeans generally profited at the natives' expense, has been dispelled. Indians recognized the value of their labor invested in fur production and negotiated accordingly. During the 1500s, the yearly rendezvous at Tadoussac, at the mouth of the Saguenay River, witnessed the gathering of over one thousand Algonkian, Etchimin, and Montagnais. These people learned quickly not to barter their furs with the first European ship to arrive; instead, they waited for others in order to bid up the price.⁶⁶ Traders' accounts are full of comments regarding the shrewd bargaining abilities of various native groups, who often played the Europeans off against one another by threatening to take their furs elsewhere if not justly compensated.⁶⁷ In addition, Indians were not satisfied with substandard goods. The Huron complained about guns that exploded and injured the user, cheap thread that made poor netting, and kettles that were too thin and wore out quickly.⁶⁸ Indians were often loath to take any metal object in trade which had even the slightest crack, since they knew from experience that such breaks would expand in the rigorous northern climate.⁶⁹ The natives were not beyond deceit either; they occasionally tried to pass defective furs as goods of high quality.⁷⁰

A quick review of some figures gives an idea of the volume of the trade and thus the degree of importance fur-bearing animals came to have. Between 1620 and 1630 the French exported between 12,000 and 30,000 beaver skins annually to Europe.⁷¹ By the 1680s the amount had reached 140,000 pounds per annum (one skin = one pound).⁷² New England supplied an annual average of over 40,000 pelts in the late seventeenth century.⁷³ In the early nineteenth century Europe received up to 200,000 beaver skins a year from America.⁷⁴ In return for this plethora of furs, Indians received a wide range of products. In 1722-23, three French forts along the Great Lakes supplied the following goods in exchange for 16,677 skins (8,307 or 49.8 percent, beaver): 1,605 sewing needles, 632 catfish hooks, 273 men's shirts, 336 women's shirts, 214 children's shirts, 217 butcher knives, 2,109 other knives, 243 pounds of red and yellow copper cauldrons, 328 axes, 59 guns, 4,493 gun flints, 3,640 pounds of shot and balls, and 6,463 pounds of flour.⁷⁵ Fort inhabitants used some of this material,

but most went to the Indians. Other European trade goods included awls, hatchets, wool stockings, sewing thread, coarse white thread for nets, iron for arrowheads, glass beads, tobacco, soap, sabers, and cutlasses.⁷⁶

IMPACT OF FUR PRODUCTION

Dependence on Trade Goods

One important result of the tendency to specialize in fur production was an increasing dependence on European products and the trade system that developed as a means of attaining them.⁷⁷ Europeans facilitated this process by establishing posts in strategic positions.⁷⁸ The technological superiority of certain European items supplied the initial impetus. Eventually, natives became dependent on the imported materials; this situation upset the balance in economies that had previously been largely self-contained.⁷⁹ As early as 1616, Indians in eastern Canada expressed their concern with maintaining the trade by offering to house Frenchmen whose fort had been destroyed by the British.⁸⁰ By the 1630s the Huron had become dependent on European tools. Iron axes and hatchets enabled them to clear land more rapidly and allowed them to raise more corn, which they exchanged for furs with their various native trading partners. Other metal cutting tools expedited a variety of manufacturing processes and thus freed more time for trade. The Huron also required metal arrowheads, which could pierce the wooden body armor used by their enemies, the Iroquois. In addition, the Huron needed European trade goods to maintain the sophisticated system of intertribal alliances on which their security and prosperity rested.⁸¹ In 1647 the Huron, beleaguered by persistent Iroquois raids, undertook the hazardous journey to the French settlements under dangerous circumstances because of the need for hatchets, guns, ammunition, and other supplies.⁸²

A similar dependence on European products was evident among the Iroquois. By the 1630s this group used iron hinges, chains, harrows, hoops, and nails in house construction and other tasks. In the next decade guns, swords, axes, mallets, and clothing of European origin were also common in many Iroquois villages.⁸³ The process of incorporation into the world-economy

was well advanced, and it was from this point on that European traders were ascendant in relations with native trade partners.

Dependence on the fur trade had a number of repercussions for the Huron and other groups. By 1630 Huronia was essentially devoid of beaver because of excessive trapping. The Huron turned increasingly to the northern and western hunting groups to sustain the flow of furs, and encouraged this process by offering substantial amounts of French artifacts in return for furs. As a result, the hunters intensified their trapping and trading activities, and spent less time on fishing and hunting for subsistence. This led to an increased reliance on agricultural peoples to make up the difference in foodstuffs. In eastern Canada, the Montagnais purchased much food from the French with a portion of their fur catch, but for other groups the Huron were a more reliable and cheaper source.⁸⁴ These conditions indicate that the Huron exploited native labor, much as Cornell suggests Europeans did with a variety of Native American groups that were incorporated ". . . as producers of peltry, into a European market. . . ."⁸⁵

As a measure of the importance of obtaining European goods, there is the evidence of continued high levels of production and exchange even under adverse conditions. Between 1636 and 1640, approximately one-half of all Hurons perished in epidemics of diseases inadvertently introduced by the French. Despite this catastrophe, fur production reached new highs in the 1640s. Trigger suggests that this level of production required substantial organizational realignment. The Huron evidently encouraged Algonkian hunters to trap more beaver than before. This activity further undermined the traditional Algonkian subsistence base, but greater dependence on Huron beans and corn, probably a more secure means of alleviating starvation, balanced the situation. The Algonkin hunters may have been open to this change because of the loss of many skilled craftsmen in the epidemics, an event that made them dependent on European utensils they received from the Huron. For the Huron, more time had to be spent in clearing land and in cultivation. In addition, as a proportion of the remaining population, more men would have been involved in trading activities. When French trade goods could be substituted for traditional Huron products that required much time to make, the increasing demands of trade probably dictated that the foreign objects be adopted.⁸⁶

As the fur trade expanded to the west and north, a similar pat-

tern of dependence emerged. The Chippewa of the Lake Superior region quickly developed a taste for trade goods introduced by the French in the late seventeenth century.⁸⁷ Quimby states that by 1760, a high degree of cultural uniformity had developed in the upper Great Lakes due to the impact of the fur trade.⁸⁸ The Chippewa and other groups, due to the adoption of European goods and the abandonment of many indigenous material culture elements, concentrated on the hunting and trapping of fur-bearing animals whose pelts they exchanged for food as well as the typical gamut of trade goods.⁸⁹

Further to the north, the Cree in the area around Hudson Bay became clients of British trading posts for clothing and tools.⁹⁰ This reliance disrupted the traditional round of meat hunting in winter and fishing in summer. Some natives went to the trading posts at the height of the caribou season to rendezvous with the supply boats, with disastrous results for the food supply.

Another problem was created by the dispensing of credits by white traders to the Indians for the purchase of fall supplies. Many natives went into debt as the result of a poor season and became even more heavily involved in trapping to make up their losses. Relief rations also became common and led to even greater dependence on European traders; this occurred as early as 1717 with the Cree at Fort Albany.⁹¹ Morantz suggests that the Cree did not abandon old practices, but instead integrated the new materials into traditional patterns; he argues that other scholars exaggerate the level of dependence of the Cree on the British.⁹² In general, however, there was a tendency for hunting and gathering societies to become more entrenched in a specialized hunting mode, with the difference that natives obtained food, often in the form of flour and pork, in exchange for furs.⁹³ The Cree case may represent involuntary induction into the fur trade, and certainly there were other such instances. In such cases, the rational decision model still operates, but specific circumstances limited the range of options.

Territorial Expansion

The traffic in furs was a catalyst that exacerbated existing animosities between native groups and spurred aggressive expansionism. This pattern was consistent in all the regions affected by the fur trade and arose out of the dependence on European goods discussed above. To assure the flow of goods, natives had to con-

trol either the production of furs or the system of dispersal. When home areas were trapped out, as happened early among the Huron and Iroquois, alternatives had to be found. In the eastern Great Lakes region, the increase in prehistoric populations due to agriculture triggered conflict well before whites arrived.⁹⁴ The advent of the fur trade added further fuel to an already volatile situation and enhanced the old rivalries. With their local sources exhausted, the Huron zealously protected their middleman role, blocked the efforts of western groups to trade directly with the French, and also kept their sources secret from the Europeans.⁹⁵

The Iroquois resorted to a more overtly aggressive plan when their local fur supplies dwindled. Since they were surrounded by other horticultural people who had little need for their food material, they could not engage in middleman exchange to the same degree as the Huron. The Iroquois opted instead for fur piracy and territorial expansion. They raided Huron and Algonkian trading parties and carried off the furs to trade with the Dutch. Expansion was primarily to the west in an effort to control hunting grounds in Ontario.⁹⁶ Iroquois raiding to the north was successful in almost completely shutting down fur expeditions along the western St. Lawrence and forcing Indians heading to French posts to take the more circuitous northern route.⁹⁷ The Iroquois also blocked groups to their south and west from transporting pelts to the Dutch traders.⁹⁸

The French, Dutch, and English were all drawn into this intense rivalry. The Europeans were often obliged to join in military alliances with their native trading partners whose requests for aid they could not refuse if the flow of furs was to continue.⁹⁹ Indians thus had a great part in determining the structure of the fur trade system, and were at the same time victims of a process they had helped to initiate.

In the western Great Lakes area, the need to procure furs drove various central Algonkian groups into new areas in search of fresh hunting grounds. Some moved from Wisconsin into Illinois territory. In the late seventeenth century the Miami migrated to the St. Joseph River, then to the Wabash and Maumee valleys. The Sauk and Fox migrated into Iowa, while the Kickapoo took up residence in central Illinois and Indiana, and the Potawatomi settled along the southern coast of Lake Michigan.¹⁰⁰

Those native groups equipped with guns held a distinct military advantage in central Canada in the search for more fur territory. Guns upset the precontact balance of power. European

weapons helped the Cree dominate the flow of furs into certain British posts. In their turn, the Chipewyan intruded on Cree lands in search of more beaver. In the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, the Blackfoot regulated the fur trade in the foothills of the Canadian Rockies; they took and defended new hunting grounds primarily on the basis of superior force provided by firearms. It became clear to many native groups that if they lacked furs, they could not obtain European materials and were at a disadvantage vis-à-vis traditional enemies who had such materials.¹⁰¹

Settlement Distribution

The fur trade had a significant impact on native settlement size and patterns. Ramsden suggests that the demands of the nascent fur trade for higher native output may have induced the first major occupation of the upper Trent Valley in Ontario in the latter part of the sixteenth century.¹⁰² As the fur trade became firmly established, some Indian groups in the Northeast and the upper Great Lakes region relocated to sites nearer the European trading posts.¹⁰³ Prior to the sixteenth century, the ancestors of the Huron and Petun were scattered in small villages from the southern edge of Georgian Bay to Lake Ontario. After the earliest appearance of European artifacts, the Huron congregated in northern Simcoe County and the Petun just to the west. These shifts seem to be fur-related tactics. The Huron positioned themselves astride the major trade routes from the St. Lawrence to the north, while the Petun gained access to the rich beaver swamps near the upper reaches of the Grand River.¹⁰⁴ These are clear examples of efforts to regulate access to resources, an important characteristic of craft specialization.

Hunting Territories

For the native to be a successful trapper and have the medium to exchange for trade goods, he had to have sufficient land at his disposal. Anthropologists have debated over how such land was managed and what role, if any, the fur trade played in realigning traditional ownership patterns. Speck was one of the first to suggest that ownership patterns were not affected; he opined that the system of family-controlled territories, passed from father

to son, was an aboriginal feature of Montagnais society that was already in place when Europeans arrived.¹⁰⁵

A number of scholars have challenged Speck's position repeatedly in more recent years. Leacock's refutation has been the most thorough and most cited. She first marshalled an impressive array of ethnohistoric data that clearly indicated private land ownership was nonexistent in any form among the Montagnais prior to the eighteenth century. In the precontact period, hunting provided basic subsistence needs. The Montagnais hunted cooperatively, shared game, and lacked the ability to preserve or transport food in great quantities. The uncertainty in hunting encouraged interfamily cooperation as a risk-reduction strategy. Once furs became the focus, hunting turned into production for trade, followed by a shift from cooperation to competition within the band. With food that could be stored, transported, and individually obtained (e.g., flour and lard), each family became self-sufficient; larger group living was unnecessary for existence and an impediment to the personal acquisition of furs. Families began to resent intrusions that could reduce fur intake and so developed a sense of ownership over particular territories, revisiting the same spots annually for the sake of greater efficiency. The process was not completed until the twentieth century, but it was one that witnessed increasing specialization by the Montagnais from the inception of the fur trade.¹⁰⁶

The fur trade had similar effects in other areas. Among the Carrier Indians of the Northwest Coast, many trade goods became indispensable items and led directly to the development of individualized trapping territories. Chiefs and nobles who previously had held land on behalf of the moiety began dividing it up among their own children instead of dispensing it to sisters' sons as before.¹⁰⁷ For the Ojibwa the partition of territory into family units occurred in the early nineteenth century under similar pressure. Although the change was not quite as drastic, the Wabanaki also experienced such a transition due to the concentration on furs.¹⁰⁸

Changes in Social Structure

The social structure of native societies also yielded to the rippling effects of the traffic in furs. Lewis describes the alteration of marriage patterns among the Blackfoot due to exposure to the fur

trade. The increased burden of preparing skins and hides placed a greater demand on female labor and thus enhanced women's economic importance. As a result, polygyny developed to a level unprecedented for the Plains. In the 1780s, most men had one or two wives, with a maximum of six. By the 1830s some wealthy chiefs had eight wives, while in the next decade most men had three, many six to eight, and a few as many as twelve wives. Later in the century some men had twenty to thirty spouses. The largest increase in wives occurred after 1833 and coincided with the burgeoning buffalo hide trade in Canada and the United States. Lewis envisions a circular system in operation. Guns obtained in the trade were used both to hunt and to conduct raids for horses. By using horses to purchase wives, men converted idle capital (extra horses) into productive capital (wives). The women served to process more hides, which went to the trading posts in exchange for guns and other commodities.¹⁰⁹

The greater emphasis on bride price measured in horses led to changes in age at marriage. A report from 1787 indicated that girls married at sixteen to eighteen, men at twenty-two and older. By the later nineteenth century, girls married between ten and sixteen, and men rarely before thirty-five. Fathers wished to marry off their daughters as soon as possible to obtain the bride price. A man, however, was not considered an eligible son-in-law until he had accumulated sufficient property through hunting and warfare. Within the household, status differences and animosities between upper and lower wives intensified, since the sororate lost force as an ameliorating influence.¹¹⁰

Indian-European economic relations also affected leadership roles in native societies. The trading captain system best exemplifies this influence. The Hudson's Bay Company initiated the practice of choosing trading captains or chiefs, respected men who set the trade terms for the whole band. Company officials formally greeted these captains, who were the only natives allowed inside the stockade, and gave them many gifts. Once negotiations had been concluded, the other Indians traded their furs through a window in the outer wall. By this technique the British rewarded the best hunters in hopes of solidifying trade relations at a time when the French were penetrating the interior to tap the market closer to new sources.¹¹¹

One viewpoint contends that the increased authority the captains enjoyed was rapidly undercut when competing Euro-

American companies coalesced into monopolies, and thus reduced the threat of competition and obviated the need to curry favor with particular natives.¹¹² Morantz takes issue with this perspective and argues that Indians as well as whites manipulated the system. Trading captains became the spokesmen for gangs of hunters whose volume of production gave the leaders greater leverage in negotiations with the British. The enhanced status these captains enjoyed, symbolized by the extra gifts and favors proffered by the white traders, led them to perpetuate the system. They retained their positions even after production dropped. Even though European fur traders heavily subsidized the system, the companies had little control over who was actually selected to be a captain and how he conducted himself towards the hunters under him. The native hunters followed such leaders and tolerated their deliberate efforts at self-aggrandizement, because the hunters also profited.¹¹³ The fur traders provided the avenue for this development, but Indian ambition drove the vehicle. Morantz's approach seems more plausible, because it provides native hunters with a voice in matters of great concern to them and models their behavior on the basis of economic strategies.

Effects on Animal Populations

The greatest impact of this system was on the basic resources, i.e., the fur-bearing animals whose pelts were the Indians' products. A frequent observation by both contemporary eyewitnesses and modern scholars refers to the excessive hunting of furs by natives to meet European demand, which resulted in the wanton annihilation of many species. This behavior is often held to be contrary to the prudent exploitation in aboriginal precontact times.¹¹⁴ Martin attributes this change, from the traditional abstemious approach to a rampant profiteering at the expense of the environment, to the deterioration of an ecological ethos which supernatural sanctions had bolstered. The native religious beliefs and world view lost their hold on the Indian mind when shamans proved utterly incapable of checking the ravages of epidemic diseases. With this traditional underpinning removed, there was no longer the fear of violating hunting taboos that regulated the amount of game that could be taken. A wholesale slaughter of animals for their fur ensued.¹¹⁵

Although this explanation is useful in comprehending some aspects of the problem, its ideational orientation does not submit itself to empirical examination. On the other hand, economic motives can be found in the ethnohistoric record; it seems more likely that the desire for trade overrode the traditional conservation ethic, as Axtell posits.¹¹⁶ Natives did not abandon but rather amended hunting taboos, due to the material conditions of a new economic reality, and this change may have been a contributing factor in the subsequent decimation of animal populations.

CONCLUSION

This study attempts to deal with the issue of specialized production in a pre-state society by defining the matter in terms of intensification and decision-making in the context of a world-economy. Through the process of cumulative concentration on a particular mode of economic activity, a situation may emerge in which substantial numbers of individuals focus their endeavors. If the stimulus towards such action is sufficiently large, a significant reordering of social and economic priorities may result. The preconditions for such a development may exist in societies at relatively low levels of sociopolitical integration. When a network of exchange is in place that draws a multitude of such groups into its web, many in an indirect fashion, the stage is set for a chain reaction of economic developments. The trigger to such a movement may be indigenous to the system. An outside influence can also take the role of catalyst and initiate a response with far-reaching consequences. However, the analysis of such an event loses much if we view influence as unidirectional, without duly considering the fertile ground into which the stimulus intervenes.

An attempt has been made to examine the North American fur trade in this light. The prehistoric native societies had developed a knowledge of their environment, both natural and social, that permitted them to accommodate rapidly to the demands of a capitalist market economy. This action involved economic specialization in both production and distribution, by way of a series of conscious choices made by the natives after balancing what they viewed as the appropriate available options. That Indians did not foresee the long-term consequences of their decisions in

no way diminishes the significance of their actions as rational behavior. By stressing fur production, they did indeed attempt to enhance their survivability. This was a rational choice made within a cultural context. Indians acted in their own self-interest, as defined by them, just as their European trading partners did. This shift in native strategies resulted from incorporation in the emerging capitalist world economic system.

To summarize the benefits of the system for Indians, furs became the medium of exchange that provided a wide range of useful products. Some of these products operated more efficiently than native counterparts or were more durable, e.g., metal hatchets, knives, needles, and pots. Guns provided a crucial advantage over rival groups and shifted the balance of power. Lack of involvement in the fur trade could mean loss of territory and economic privation if traditional opponents followed the opposite course.

To maximize their benefits, native groups tried to regulate access to furs either by defending hunting grounds against native intruders or by blocking direct European contact with the richest fur-trapping regions. The need for increased efficiency led to structural changes. Indians manipulated social practices to enhance the labor pool. Various groups and individuals adopted different strategies in efforts to maximize their returns.

European nations involved in the fur trade derived various benefits. Dress items of fur became an important part of European fashion. Probably more important, though, was the stimulus provided to various European industries. North American furs were important commodities in the re-export trade. In addition, the return trade to North America consisted of a wide range of manufactured products, including metal articles, guns, and blankets. The quantity of goods sent to North America enhanced opportunities for employment in various industries and increased chances for entrepreneurs to make profits. The growth in European productive capacity to meet the demands of trans-Atlantic commerce certainly had an impact on the development of capitalist economic and political institutions, such as the emergence of large trading companies, which set patterns for the exploitation of other markets in Africa and Asia as the scope of the world system increased.

The importance of North America in the world-economy is evidenced by the fact that the fur trade remained at a substantial

level even during the economically stagnant seventeenth century.¹¹⁷ It seems Native Americans provided a constant and welcome market for European industrial goods and thus supported continuous production in a period otherwise characterized by depressed markets on the continent. In effect, the periphery acted as a bulwark, albeit not consciously, to assist the core over a period of economic difficulty. Indian demand for guns, blankets, clothing, kettles, and many other products stimulated production of these items in Europe and maintained the momentum of the fur trade. Francis Jennings contends that Indian consumer demands were crucial in the shaping of imperial policy and influenced the development of England's most important industry, the production of woolen textiles. He suggests the Indian market helped English merchants compensate for shortfalls in woolen exports to the continent during the seventeenth century.¹¹⁸

Many of the items discussed above meet Torrence's criteria for craft specialization. Those that relate to controlling access to resources include the use of a middleman status (e.g., by the Huron) to block European contact with Indian trappers in the interior; the relocation of entire settlements to facilitate access to hunting grounds or trade routes; the expansion of hunting territory well beyond traditional boundaries; and the change to private ownership in an effort to assure a larger individual harvest of furs. Efforts to enhance efficiency are evident in the more intense use of traditional hunting practices and the adoption of new technology (e.g., steel traps); the emphasis on hunting and trading skills, as seen in the captain system; and the concentration on hunting and trapping of furs well beyond the levels evident in earlier times, to the detriment of certain traditional subsistence practices. Evidently, the Indians viewed this approach as an acceptable risk, since food could be provided by white traders in large quantities. The taking of furs was so efficient that animal populations dropped precipitously and necessitated other actions, such as the expansion of hunting territories.

Native Americans obviously found the rewards abundant and the risks acceptable and so continued on this path of intensification that, I believe, reached the level of a craft specialization. In fact, many Indian groups were soon faced with a diminishing returns situation. The initial investment in the concentrated hunting of furs provided a large marginal return. As home areas were

trapped out, however, and groups had to move further afield, the attendant costs rose dramatically and "profits" dropped. Once native groups became involved in the fur trade, it was not possible to extricate themselves easily, if at all, because such an action would end the flow of European goods and place a group at the mercy of native competitors who maintained their roles. Incorporation led to Indian dependence on many European goods, but the process was complex and was built on actions taken by both sides.

The move toward specialized production of furs by Native American groups occurred as a component of an international market economy. European commerce could absorb the raw materials provided by Indians and, more importantly, could reciprocate with a vast array of manufactured items that Indians desired and for which they were willing to make changes in their social and economic patterns. Many individuals in Native American groups chose to concentrate on the hunting of fur-bearing animals and to make the necessary changes in lifestyle that would enhance that activity, because they viewed the economic rewards as substantial and desirable. The Indian mindset, in terms of economic choice, was basically the same as that of the whites to whom they traded the furs. What Native Americans failed to see were the long-term effects of their decisions. The more deeply Indians became involved in the fur trade (reflected by the level of craft specialization), the more they curtailed their future options.

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NOTES

1. Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974). In Wallerstein's terms, North America was a peripheral

area, which he defines as ". . . that geographical sector of it [a world-economy] wherein production is primarily of lower-ranking goods . . . but which is an integral part of the overall system of the division of labor, because the commodities involved are essential for daily use" (301-302).

2. *Ibid.*, 348.
3. *Ibid.*, 348-50.
4. Thomas D. Hall, "Incorporation in the World-System: Toward a Critique," *American Sociological Review* 51 (1986):390-402.
5. Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982); Hall, "Incorporation," 398-99.
6. Frederik Barth, *Political Leadership among Swat Pathans* (London: Athlone, 1959), 2.
7. George Homans, "Social Behavior as Exchange," *The American Journal of Sociology* 62 (1958), 597-606.
8. Robbins Burling, "Maximization Theories and the Study of Economic Anthropology," *American Anthropologist* 64 (1962):802-21.
9. Robin Torrence, *Production and Exchange of Stone Tools* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
10. V. Gordon Childe, "The Urban Revolution," *Town Planning Review* 21 (1950); reprinted in *The Rise and Fall of Civilizations*, ed. Jeremy A. Sabloff and C. C. Lamberg-Karlovsky (Menlo Park, CA: Cummings Publishing, 1974), 6-14.
11. Lewis O. Saum, *The Fur Trader and the Indian* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1965), 42.
12. Wallerstein, *The World System II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600-1750* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 102.
13. Eleanor Leacock, *The Montagnais "Hunting Territory" and the Fur Trade*, American Anthropological Association Memoir No. 78 (1954), 7.
14. For a detailed treatment of these groups, see Bruce G. Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic*, 2 vols. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1976). Specific studies of the Huron and Iroquois include John A. Dickinson, "The Pre-Contact Huron Population. A Reappraisal," *Ontario History* 72 (1980):173-79; and Thomas S. Abler, "Longhouse and Palisade: Northeastern Iroquoian Villages of the Seventeenth Century," *Ontario History* 62 (1970):17-40.
15. George I. Quimby, *Indian Culture and European Trade Goods* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 124.
16. Thomas E. Norton, *The Fur Trade in Colonial New York* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), 27.
17. Lewis H. Morgan, *League of the Ho-de-no-sau-nee or Iroquois* (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1922), 11-13.
18. W. J. Eccles, *The Canadian Frontier 1534-1760* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969), 19.
19. R. G. Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travel and Exploration of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791* (Cleveland, OH: Burrows, 1896-1901), 6:300.
20. Baron de Lahontan, *New Voyages to North America*, ed. Reuben G. Thwaites (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1905, from the 1703 English edition), 482.
21. Pierre de Charlevoix, *Journal of a Voyage to North America*, translated from the French (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1761), 152.
22. Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations*, 6:303. J. C. B., *Travels in New France by J. C. B.*,

- ed. Sylvester K. Stevens, Donald H. Kent, and Emma E. Woods (Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Historical Commission, 1941), 49.
23. Eccles, *Canadian Frontier*, 19.
 24. de Charlevoix, *Journal of a Voyage*, 152–53.
 25. Eccles, *Canadian Frontier*, 19–20.
 26. de Lahontan, *New Voyages*, 482.
 27. Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations*, 5:61, 6:299–300; de Charlevoix, *Journal of a Voyage*, 166; de Lahontan, *New Voyages*, 483; James Axtell, ed. *The Indian People of Eastern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 116.
 28. Mari Sandoz, *The Beaver Men* (New York: Hastings House, 1964), 10–12.
 29. Still-hunting took place before the water surface froze. The native hunters waited until dusk when the beaver came on shore to feed. Gliding up quietly in a canoe, a bowman shot several animals, then plunged into the water after them before the wounded animals got into deep water and were lost. (Sandoz, *Beaver Men*, 132–33.) For a description of dead-fall traps, see H. M. Robinson, *The Great Fur Land* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1879), 244–45.
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