The First Consumer Revolution

The Seventeenth Century

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candidates for a consumer revolution could not be found, certainly not fifty or seventy-five years before their “civilized” and admittedly materialistic English counterparts experienced one.

Such skepticism is unwarranted. The Indians of the Eastern Woodlands experienced a consumer revolution every bit as revolutionary as that experienced by their European suppliers, though not identical in every respect, and they did so many years earlier, usually as soon as the commercial colonists founded trading posts, comptoirs, and nascent settlements. How, if the natives lived in penury, was this possible? Without gold or silver mines like those in Mexico and Peru, how did native North Americans across the social spectrum (which was not wide in any case) find the purchase price of any European goods, much less goods in sufficient quantity and variety to warrant a “revolutionary” denomination?

The per capita wealth of Indian America, though it cannot be measured in native currencies, increased dramatically from the earliest stages of contact because European traders were willing and eager to pay top pound, franc, and florin for American animal pelts and skins, which the Indians were adept in curing and procuring for their own domestic uses. Three kinds of pelts were the most lucrative for the Indians. Beaver, for which the natives had little use before the trade, became the best seller because its soft, microscopically barbed underfur was in great demand for the manufacture of broad-brimmed felt hats for Europe’s gentlemen. A ready market also existed for rare and luxurious “small furs,” such as marten, otter, and black fox, which were used to trim the rich gowns of the high-born. And beginning in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, the Indians of the Southeast could sell any number of humbler but larger deerskins, which provided scarce leather for Continental breeches, saddlebags, bookbindings, and workingmen’s aprons. The European demand for skins the natives regarded as commonplace was seemingly insatiable and enabled all male hunters of a tribe to participate in the search for income-producing pelts if they wished.

To judge by the traders’ export figures, a substantial majority of native hunters did quite well in the new European market. The Mohicans and eastern Iroquois brought about 8,000 beaver and otter skins to the Dutch posts at Fort Orange and New Amsterdam in 1626. By the late 1650s, 46,000 pelts were pouring into Fort Orange alone.4 The French in Canada were even better supplied by their native partners. In 1614, only six years after the founding of Quebec, 25,000 skins, mostly beaver, were shipped to France’s hatters. By the 1620s the Montagnais on the north shore of the St. Lawrence were trading 12–15,000 pelts at Tadoussac every year. In flotillas of 60–70 canoes, some 200 Huron traders from southern Ontario brought 10,000 skins a year to Quebec. Twenty years later, even as their population was cut in half by disease and intertribal warfare, the Hurons produced 30,000 beaver pelts annually.5 In New England, the Plymouth colony was able to pay off its English creditors only because Abenaki hunters on the Kennebec River in Maine kept them supplied with animal skins: about 8,000 beavers and 1,156 otters between 1631 and 1636 alone. Even then the lion’s share of Abenaki pelts went to French traders from Acadia.6

To the south, the natives of the interior supplied Charleston’s outgoing ships with 54,000 deerskins a year between 1700 and 1715. Between 1740 and 1762 the take was up to 152,000 skins a year. The best hunters were the Muskogeas or Creeks of Alabama and Georgia. In 1720 they traded more than 80,000 skins to South Carolina and French Mobile. Forty years later, with a new market in Savannah, they were killing 140,000 deer every season.7 In the 1750s the Cherokees took 25,000 skins annually from the mountains of North Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee, an average of 12 deer for each of 2,000 warriors. In the twenty years between 1739 and 1759, Cherokee hunters alone reduced the southeastern deer population by 1.25 million.8

Clearly, the natives of eastern America controlled resources that were in great demand in Europe. But did they realize their profit potential? Or did they kill all those animals for a few cheap trinkets and a sweater or two of rottngut rum, leaving themselves no better off than they were before the advent of the white man? British traders in particular knew that the natives, whose simple lives required few necessities, had to be given a sense of personal “Property” if their American business was ever to thrive. For a notion of material accumulation, “though it would not increase their real Necessities, yet it would furnish them with imaginary Wants.”9 By 1679, Indians from Hudson Bay to the Carolinas had discovered that “many Things which they wanted not before because they never had them are by means [of the trade] become necessary both for their use & ornament.”10 They had been, in a stay-at-home European’s words, “cosened by a desire of new-fangled novelties.”11

But had they? To hear both native hunters and knowledgeable Europeans tell it, the Indian was nobody’s fool and certainly felt that he made out like a bandit in his dealings with the rubes from the Old World. For ordinary skins “which cost them almost nothing,” the Indians received novel trade goods superior to their own artifacts of skin, bone, stone, and wood.12 A Montagnais hunter once exclaimed that “The Beaver does everything perfectly well, it makes kettles, hatchets, swords, knives, bread, in short it makes everything.” He was making sport of us Europeans,” explained his Jesuit guest, “who have such a fondness for the skin of this animal and who fight to see who will give the most to these Barbarians, to get it.” Some while later, the same Indian said to the Frenchman, holding out a very beautiful knife, “The English have no sense; they give us twenty knives like this for one Beaver skin.”13

While the natives didn’t easily understand price fluctuations obedient to Western laws of supply and demand, they were shrewd enough to advance their own bargaining position by playing European competitors against each other, by avoiding superfluitics that had no place in their own culture, and by being extremely finicky about the quality and style of goods they would accept. In 1642 Roger Williams noted how the Narragansets of Rhode Island “will
These hoes were excavated from a Narragansett cemetery on Conanicut Island, Jamestown, Rhode Island, by Professor William Simmons in 1966–67. They were buried with an elderly woman as grave offerings between 1620 and 1660. From William Scranton Simmons, Cauanticaunus's House: An Indian Burial Ground on the Island of Conanicut in Narragansett Bay (Providence: Brown University Press, 1970); it is reproduced with the kind permission of University Press of New England.

of traders. They make it clear why most of the early Indian names for Europeans meant "Cloth makers" or "Coat-men" when they were not called "Iron-Workers" or "Swordmen."^24

Why would the natives spend their fur proceeds on European cloth when they already had perfectly adaptable fur and skin clothing? Woolen blanketing or duffels was the single biggest seller for several reasons: it was lighter and as warm as a fur mantle or matchcoat, it dried faster and remained softer and suppler than wet skins and was even warm when wet, it came in bright colors which natural berry and root dyes could not duplicate (though most Indians preferred "sad" hues of red and blue), and, with metal knives and scissors, it could quickly be fashioned into leggings, breechclouts, tie-on sleeves, or mantles by women who no longer had to laboriously cure and dress several skins. Another potential advantage was seldom realized because the Indians almost never washed their clothes and literally wore them off their backs.~25

Soap was not in the trader's kit until the more fastidious nineteenth century, and since the dead were always buried in their best clothes, cloth heirlooms and hand-me-downs were rare. With the "bargains" offered by the European traders, the natives found it easier to buy new threads than to slave over a soapy stream.

This Revolutionary-era engraving of Thayanoquin or "King Hendrick" (c. 1680–1755), chief, diplomat, and orator of the Mohawks, demonstrates the native adaptation of European trade cloth. His shirt is linen or calico, and his mantle and breechclout are made of English wool duffels. Hendrick had visited England in 1710 and again in 1740, when he received a blue coat with gold lace and a cocked hat from King George II. The 39 notches on the tree indicate the number of men Hendrick, a Protestant convert, had killed or captured on the warpath against the French and their native allies. From an anonymous engraving, c. 1776, in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

While cloth was in great demand in Indian country, a few items were unpopular. There was almost no market for tight or fitted clothing, for example. Until the genteel eighteenth century, no native man would have been caught dead in a pair of European breeches: they impeded running and other natural functions (southern men, at least, squatted to urinate). Elaborate military-style coats with braid, buttons, and capacious cuffs were worn only by
two compelling arguments: the Indians were dying in excessive numbers from drink-related murders (and, we know also, from exposure and increased susceptibility to colds, pneumonia, and other diseases), and the temperance issue “produce[d] all Evil and Contention between man and wife, between the Young Indians and the Sachims.” Alcohol was clearly one trade good the natives could well have done without.

By contrast, mirrors seem terribly tame as novelties go. But the first “looking-glasses” and mirror boxes, which reached the remote Senecas of western New York by the 1620s, may have promoted a preoccupation with personal fashion as much as full-length hanging mirrors did among the genteel colonists. Among the Indians, however, “the men, upon the whole, [were] more fond of dressing than the women” and carried their mirrors with them on all their journeys, which the women did not. As a vehicle of vainglory, the mirror was a necessity, especially for young warriors who now had more income to spend on imported face paints, jewelry, and other finery. Before the advent of mirrors, a native coxcomb had to have his face painted “by some woman or girl,” which curtailed his independence and let some of the air out of his vanity. With his own mirror, which he wore constantly around his wrist or over his shoulder, he could arrange his hair, refresh his scalplock, and paint his face to his heart’s content in the privacy of his own toilette. One unfoppish Frenchman who knew the Great Lakes tribes well believed that “if they had a mirror before their eyes they would change their appearance every quarter of an hour.” But the tell-tale object, like all spiritual power, was capable of bringing bad news as well. During the great smallpox epidemic of 1738, which killed half of the Cherokee population, “a great many” Indians “killed themselves” by shooting, cutting their throats, stabbing, and throwing themselves into fires because they had seen themselves disfigured by the pox in their ubiquitous mirrors and, “being naturally proud,” could not stand the literal loss of face.

We can now appreciate the amazing variety of European goods that reached Indian customers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To constitute a revolution comparable to the later English one, however, these material products had to arrive in native villages in such quantities that tribesmen and women up and down the social scale had their lives altered by the pursuit, purchase, and use of them. There are basically two ways to establish these quantities. The indirect way is to look at the substantial leap in exports from England to the American colonies in the seventeenth century. It is surely no coincidence that exports of woolens and metalwares doubled between the 1660s and 1700, and miscellaneous manufactures, including tableware and sewing accoutrements, increased threefold. Most of those items were the mainstays of the Indian trade, which we know was burgeoning, even as the native population was declining from disease, wars, and dislocation.

The more direct way is to register the changes in Indian villages, either above or below ground, at the time or later. Obviously, we don’t have comparable evi-
chief, one who sold his tribal lands to white men and pocketed most of the proceeds, rather than consulting the will of his people and distributing the revenues among them. Nor did he share his personal property as a traditional chief would have a century earlier. This Indian looked out for Number One in good capitalist fashion: he gave many thoughts to his own family's future but far fewer to that of his "subjects" who labored menially for his English models and neighbors.43

But most Indians in colonial America were unable to ride the crest of change like King George and were caught instead in the undertow and dragged into dependence and debt. In their initial rush to acquire the material marvels of Europe, they gave no thought to the future and hunted out the game that gave them access to foreign markets. When the beaver and white-tail deer disappeared, the natives were left with nothing to sell but their land, their labor, or their military services, which the proliferating colonists were only too glad to buy at bargain rates. Those prices, paid always in desirable trade goods, were low because, with the game diminished, the Indians had little leverage left and had become dangerously dependent on their European suppliers for an ever-growing list of "necessities." In 1705 Robert Beverley noticed that "The English have taken away great part of their Country, and consequently made everything less plenty amongst them. They have intro-

Ezra Stiles, later president of Yale College, drew this plan of Phebe and Elizabeth Mohege's wigwam in Niantic, Connecticut, in 1761. Its acculturated owners had furnished this ancient Indian dwelling with many English colonial items, such as a tea table, chest, a table and chair, and a dresser. Edward G. Schumaker has artistically reconstructed the Mohege's lodge with period furnishings from the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of History and Technology. From William C. Sturtevant, "Two 1761 Wigwams at Niantic, Connecticut," American Antiquity, 40:4 (1975), 437-44. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University and William Sturtevant.
Trade in the Eighteenth-Century

Southeast

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