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## **THE ROOTS OF DEPENDENCY: SUBSISTENCE, ENVIRONMENT, AND SOCIAL CHANGE AMONG THE CHOCTAWS, PAWNEES, AND NAVAJOS**

Richard White, University of Nebraska Press, 1983.

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American Indian narratives remain marginalized within United States history. A scholar must confront the colonial paradigm and tell indigenous stories that are complex and accurate, bringing this minority from the silent periphery to the historical center. Agency, defined simply as the ability for individuals to shape their own history, is the primary vehicle for indigenous voice. Richard White's work illustrates this concept through three case studies regarding the Choctaw, Pawnee, and Navajo tribes. White, a major contributor to the new significance trend in the history of the American West, argues a complexity exists between these groups, their environment, and a growing capitalist economy.

White explores these trends through the historical prism of dependency. Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World System* provides an appropriate framework for White's argument against many scholars that dependency theory can be useful. This system theory helps explain how individuals or states in Wallerstein's case are incorporated into a larger capitalist system (xvi). White maintains that the struggle between center and periphery can be found in dependency theory. This concept is an adequately nuanced framework that includes culture, politics, environment, and economy as forces contributing to indigenous decline from autonomy. White accepts the dangers of homogenized theory—that dependency fails to account for all contingencies—claiming, it would be as big a mistake “to deny the outcome of these histories as it is to reduce them to a single, simple cause” (xix).

In subsequent chapters, White continues his interdisciplinary approach by integrating anthropology, history, and ecology. Each methodology informs his narrative of native decline and ultimate reliance upon an Anglo-European economic system. He employs the anthropologic concept of close controlled comparison, or a method of evaluating reciprocal effects of closely related groups, to analyze the Choctaw, Pawnee, and Navajo experiences. However, White does this in a macro way, failing to evaluate adaptations of indigenous groups closely associated with these three tribes. Nevertheless, his case studies illuminate important colonial processes that galvanized Anglo-European power and marginalized indigenous peoples to a socio-economic periphery.

Many factors were responsible for Choctaw decline and ultimate dependency. The geographical landscape and environment took typical borderland form. Choctaw subsistence farming employed basic irrigation technology that garnered crop yields and fostered a galvanized community and political base. However, Spanish merchants and European explorations in the eighteenth century saw contact take a deadly form: disease. White demonstrates that the Choctaws fared better against other indigenous groups in the area partly due to a well organized social base, but they did experience decline.

Dependency for the Choctaws came in two other forms. First, due to indigenous hunting practices and European intrusion, Choctaw tribal hunting grounds saw a decrease in white-tailed deer herds. More people on the land equaled fewer resources to draw from. What ended this decline was intertribal war. Conflicts between indigenous groups such as the Chickasaws and Choctaws made the land danger-

ous for all. This lack of use generated by a heightening of hostilities, according to White, allowed for deer repopulation, returning balance to the ecological landscape. However, the Choctaws' subsistence patterns were not "dictated by their environment but rather historically derived and culturally maintained, the arrival of European culture, the destruction of disease, and an acceptance of a new economy, created new possibilities for ecological and social change" (32).

A second impetus of Choctaw dependency was their economic play-off system. As the English and French established borderland enclaves, Choctaws entered into the growing commercial trade with an ability to influence both powers' economic dealings. However, the problem was in perception; Europeans viewed trade as a means for personal or group advantage whereas Choctaw traders saw the economic system through a lens of reciprocity. The English recognized the indigenous mentality and were determined to phase it out (57). They exploited the inelastic nature of Choctaw markets and encouraged a debt/credit system through liquor trade. Thus, decline quickly translated into dependency.

The Pawnees and Navajos encountered similar processes. European market forces inculcated a new social order, fostering a collaboration ethic among the Pawnees and Europeans. Environmental forces such as deer populations affected hunting methods and new ecological landscapes required compatible horticulture practices. European gifts such as horses were given to the Pawnee leadership, encouraging excessive buffalo hunts and stratification within the indigenous economy. Disease, intertribal warfare with the Sioux, and the demise of buffalo all contributed to Pawnee dependency.

The Navajo decline story centers around livestock-reduction, restrictive irrigation practices, and agricultural loss due to soil problems. The Diné followed a sheep-based economy with ranged herds reaching approximately one million by 1930. Kinship units garnered wealth through a limited sheep market system and redistributed their earnings to the less fortunate. However, sheep represented more than a means to prosperous financial ends; they were iconic to Navajo culture—a part of the family.

Irrigation and arid soil, according to White, represented another vehicle of Navajo dependency. Problems of overgrazing, soil erosion, and irrigation inefficiencies all contributed to Navajo decline. Indigenous irrigation practices conflicted with American strategies, resulting in chaotic water use and flooded fields. Navajo farmers found "they could meet their needs better by working for white farmers than farming their own lands" (285). Also, the impact of American government control by John Collier and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) only reinforced Diné compliance.

While these two groups prove important to White's overall premise that dependency was the result of myriad forces, they seemingly lack the kind of complex political, social, and environmental processes that the Choctaw experience exudes. The Pawnee and Navajo narratives are important, and White demonstrates their significance, but the Choctaw story tends to carry the work overall. This imbalance could be the result of manuscript confines or an attempt by the author to connect these very complex groups under the dependency banner. Nevertheless, White does prove lacking in this context.

White's book has other weakness as well. His use of the racial label "white" to denote European expansion is misleading. A myriad of groups helped foster indigenous decline. This racial generalization is also illustrated in White's characterization of English traders as "knives, murderers, rapists, and all-purpose reprobates" (56). Perhaps most glaring is White's failure to appropriate economic agency to the Choctaw, Pawnee, and Navajo. Indigenous trading existed before European arrival and many scholars such as Alexandra Harmon, Elliot West, and others have identified gift giving as an illustration of this trading network.

These problems aside, however, *The Roots of Dependency* is an important piece to the American Indian scholarship jigsaw. Richard White provides a complex narrative within a theory structure that is rarely pursued in American history narratives. His work is well written, argued with precision, and confronts the historical tendencies of reductionism and determinism. His suggestion that “culture itself shapes environments...and natural events, no matter how significant, do not affect people directly” may generate some criticism, but overall it is groundbreaking in scope and breadth (151). White’s book is a model study of dependency theory and American Indian history. Its legacy is seen and heard in contemporary circles and will continue to inform future generations of scholars.