CHAPTER ONE

COMMERCE AND IMAGINATION IN AMERICA’S INDIAN TRADE

In his classic ethnohistory of the seventeenth century Iroquois Five Nations, George T. Hunt drew on the observations of the French memoirist, Nicholas Perrot, who suggested that “self-interest” had guided Indians from their first contact with Europeans.1 Hunt went on to create an influential theory that such an inclination prompted the Iroquois peoples to jealously secure the fur trade and protect their access to trade goods upon which they had grown dependent: “by one means or another” they would control this trade, whether in warfare with their neighbors or by the acquisition of European firearms.2

Hunt did not question why it was that Perrot, a trader, had made this observation about Indian character in the first place and why, in the middle years of the seventeenth century, he and many other French writers had begun to identify the same human passions in America that could, in fact, facilitate trade with Europeans.3 But there was little coincidence in the timing. Perrot and his contemporaries transferred the idea of intérêt to the forests of America in a period when opinion at home was in the midst of significant change, both in regards to commerce in general and “self-interest” as an idea was invigorating a nascent, but unmistakable liberal spirit in Europe. From the 1660s onwards, Dutch, English and French writers agreed in the ways that commerce could attach members of society into a more harmonious whole. Virtues could be found in the “great chain of selling,” as Dutch commercial writer Pieter de la Court had written.4 That society could be

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2 Hunt, The Wars of the Iroquois, p. 35.

3 Saum does not examine the critical dimension of chronology within the ethnological observations he ascribes to fur traders. See Lewis O. Saum, The Fur Trader and the Indian (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), pp. 133–152.

strengthened in the progress du commerce was a proposition enthusiastically taken up by those undertaking colonization ventures abroad. Indeed, if there was a “science of commerce” worthy of study in Europe, surely it had relevance, if not urgency, in its pursuit in America. Colonial and metropolitan writers like Perrot, then, hastened to demonstrate Indians sharing acquisitiveness and following universal inclinations to trade in ways that earlier writers had dismissed, ignored or downplayed altogether. Of more consequence, their America groaned with need for European goods. Many of Perrot’s contemporaries, especially those with now vulnerable commercial stakes in a widening trade in furs, skins or even slaves in America, argued that the Indians’ purchase of European goods could improve their social organization and manners; and trade could facilitate a cultural transformation now commonly understood as the Indians’ “civilization.”

By the eighteenth century, Europe’s widening commercial activities laid the basis for a robust intellectual infrastructure to both sustain and justify its growing trading relations abroad. In the Eurocentric logic of trading empires, the colonial world seemed most obliging in that respect. The periphery was veritably animate with remitters paying book debts. Goods moved almost magically via bills of exchange ordered at the whim of metropolitan financiers. Final accounts were cleared in the creaking timbers of near-bursting cargo holds. Europe’s trading nations had discovered their reflections in distant realms, and, in their most enlightened way, “discovered” similar people with whom they could trade and make fantastic profit. It is perhaps not surprising that commerce was hardly a

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