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DIS 306

Question #3: The centuries prior to 1900 saw North America becoming ever more integrated into markets and trade networks that became more geographically extensive over time. Using examples drawn from lectures, readings, and discussion sections, analyze what you see as the most important impacts this process of market expansion and integration had on the lives of native peoples, plants, and animals in North America.

#### Urban Markets and the Expanding Frontier

In “The Machine in the Garden”, Prof. Cronon introduces the concept of Johann Heinrich Von Thunen’s rings as a means of describing how markets, centered in urban areas, define the land use and lifeways of the people, plants and animals that surround them. Closest to town, high-value, highly perishable products are grown and made. Further out in the next ring, non-perishable monoculture crops dominate vast tracts of land, supplying the market with its staples. Beyond that lies the zone where livestock roam, and beyond that the frontier, home of rare, extremely valuable products for anyone ambitious to ship them all the way to the city. Improved transportation technology compresses the travel time between the rings, and therefore makes them more extensive. When the innovation of ocean-going ships brought European colonists to the shores of North America, the furthest reaches of their zones of commerce arrived with them. The introduction of the market launched a radical transformation of the lives of North American peoples, plants, and animals. In particular, this essay will focus on Indian involvement in the fur

trade, the importation of European crops and the adoption of American ones, and the market hunting that all but annihilated some species later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

When colonists began to establish their homesteads in North America, the ways of life for the native peoples changed dramatically. The devastating impact of Old World pathogens was discussed in both the Crosby reading and the lecture “Migration, Disease, and Death”. Beyond the decimation of their population, the Indians also had to contend with the extensive, largely uncultivated lands they relied on for subsistence being rapidly deforested, cut up into fields, and overrun by European domesticated animals. Finally, with the establishment of a permanent route between the two continents across which people and products could flow, the Indians (unwillingly) saw their land become the outermost of Von Thunen’s rings: the frontier, a place where highly valuable commodities could be extracted and shipped to distant markets for profit. New England proved to be a bust as far as European hopes for gold and silver went, but furs, especially the beaver, quickly became the frontier’s most precious resource. As Prof. Cronon described in “Selling Animals”, Indians’ participation as suppliers in the fur trade is often chalked up to the “cool stuff” they wanted from the Europeans. This argument relies on the presumption that European pieces of equipment—guns, traps, and farm tools—were inherently superior to indigenous ones, and that Indians immediately recognized this. However, Cronon argues that this oversimplification diminishes the fact that native peoples typically preferred their traditional methods, and instead traded for European, or, importantly, indigenous goods as a way of acquiring status symbols. He cites the dismantling of copper kettles to create jewelry, not due to ignorance of their practicality, but because of the cultural status associated with the beauty of rare objects. In particular, wampum was a highly prized cultural good that began to operate as a currency once Indians entered the fur trade (*Changes in the Land*, 95). Therefore, the

introduction of the market to New England's Indian population led not only to a change in lifestyle, but a change in the cultural value of material goods.

North America's plant life also experienced major impacts from the introduction of the market. Large tracts of native trees and underbrush were cleared to make room for the preferred European monocultures, particularly wheat. Massive wheat fields resided in Von Thunen's zone of extensive agriculture, where cheap cleared land produced large quantities of non-perishable staple crops. Farmers in this zone keep costs down through low rents, mechanization, and economy of scale, and make their money back by supplying a bread-hungry urban market. However, indigenous crops were also co-opted and grown in dramatically different ways than the Indians had. Corn, an American commodity that the Indians grew in small plots along with other crops like beans, became a mainstay in the zone of extensive agriculture. However, most of corn's food value went into the mouths of livestock rather than people, a significant departure from its previous use as a supplement to a hunted and gathered diet. Additionally, hay fields that naturally thrived in salt marshes or former beaver ponds were sought out by colonists as places to graze their imported animals (*Changes in the Land*, 106). Later, hay fields in the zone of extensive agriculture would become the fuel reserves for the vehicle on which pre-automobile cities depended for all of their transportation and commerce: the horse ("Machine in the Garden"). Therefore, the development of the urban market led to the introduction of new crops and the repurposing of old ones to fit the needs of the market.

Finally, the introduction of modes of transport that brought the frontier closer to the city led to the rise of market hunting, particularly in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. In the lecture "Hunters and Hunted", Cronon uses two major case studies to prove how the expansion of urban markets into the frontier led to the near or total extinction of two species: the American bison and the

passenger pigeon. The passenger pigeon, along with many other types of birds, were hunted in massive numbers for their meat, but also their plumes and other body parts, which were used to adorn fashionable women's hats. Crafty techniques involving nets allowed a small group of market hunters to kill birds by the thousands, including a famous 40-day stretch where more than 11 million pigeons were harvested. Meanwhile in the American West, the huge bison herds that sustained the plains Indians were being systemically annihilated for their skins, which were used to make robes that fetched high prices in urban centers. The factor that ties these two hunts together was the completion of railroad linkages between cities and the frontier. Now, enormous amounts of product could rapidly and cheaply be shipped to eager urban markets. In the case of meat, the introduction of the refrigerated railroad car allowed animals to be killed in even more distant places and shipped to market before spoiling. Not only did the innovations in transportation make the Von Thunen frontier ring larger, it promoted the appropriation of its highly valuable products at an unprecedented rate.

Through the lens of Von Thunen's rings, historians can track how the gradual expansion of urban markets profoundly impacted the people, plants, and animals that had resided in North America prior to the arrival of Europeans. Before the establishment of cities, the newly colonized continent became the frontier for European urban markets. This led to significant changes in the livelihood and culture of the indigenous peoples. As the settler population grew and urbanized, the needs of their cities began to govern the use of the land around them. This in turn affected how crops, both imported and indigenous, were farmed, as well as how prized frontier animal resources were commodified and exploited.

## Outline

Intro/thesis: The biggest impacts of the expansion of the market economy to North America were the transformation of the Indians into traders, especially for fur, the importation of European crops coupled with industrial farming of indigenous ones, and the destruction of native species by the expansion of urban hunting markets.

### Paragraph 1: Transformation of the indigenous economy

- The “cool stuff” theory—partially true, but overly simplistic
- Objects such as copper and especially wampum could bring prestige, which was much more important than guns for example
- Von Thunen’s rings: furs were so highly valued in Europe that killing fur-bearing animals and shipping them across the ocean was a profitable enterprise
- A radical shift from subsistence hunting and horticulture

### Paragraph 2: New crops, new methods

- Importation of the large-scale monoculture fields associated with European farming
- Wheat was crucial to feed bread-based markets
- Corn was grown on an unprecedented scale to feed livestock
- Von Thunen: Zone of extensive agriculture. Staple crops grown on vast tracts of cheap land far from urban markets. Reduce costs through cheap land and economy of scale.

### Paragraph 3: Market hunting

- “Hunters and the Hunted”
- Transport, especially the train, revolutionized this

- Bison hunted for their skins, birds like the passenger pigeon for their plumes
- A new and much more wasteful form of hunting in contrast to indigenous methods
- Once again at the periphery of Von Thunen's rings: mechanized transport made the frontier much more accessible to the urban buyer