H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Linda Barrington, ed. *The Other Side of the Frontier: Economic Explorations into Native American History.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998. xiii + 301 pp. $40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8133-3396-0; $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-3395-3.

Reviewed by Thomas Weiss (Department of Economics, University of Kansas)
Published on EH.Net (January, 1999)

This is a welcome and useful collection of articles, even though the articles are not new and original pieces and are not focused on any one theme of Native American history. Although most of the essays were published previously, their concentration in one place helps to get across the key idea that Native Americans responded to economic signals in much the same way that economic theory would predict for any rational economic agent. The essays cover a wide swath of time, space and issues, and this diversity helps underscore the universality of their responses to economic forces.

The collection appears to have been motivated in part to provide material for those interested in providing a more "diversity-friendly" economics curriculum, in part to disseminate more widely recent literature that examines Native American history from an economics perspective, and in part to stimulate further research along these same lines.

I doubt that the essays will be much used to diversify the economics curriculum. With the exception of the articles by Ann Carlos and Frank Lewis, "Property Rights and Competition in the Depletion of the Beaver," Leonard Carlson, "The Economics and Politics of Irrigation Projects on Indian Reservations, 1900-1940," and by Terry Anderson and Fred McChesney, "The Political Economy of Indian Wars," the analysis is not developed in ways that would make it suitable to teach some particular economic concept or behavior. And the latter article, although a nice example of the application of political economic models, is not likely to be the sort of topic covered in many introductory economic courses. If the idea is to diversify the curriculum in economic history courses, then the collection fares much better. In addition to these three, several other articles would be useful as well.

The book should serve to stimulate further research on the economic behavior of Native Americans within institutional constraints rather than that of an exploited people decimated by the advance of western civilization. The latter is a well known story. It is now time to better understand how Native Americans behaved under those pressures and how those developments and their reactions have bearing on current issues facing Native Americans and U.S. society. Most of the articles make clear where some further research is called for, and the totality of the collection provides a sense that all this is a line of inquiry well worth pursuing. The authors are, of course, careful to point out that any research will be hampered by a lack of evidence, especially evidence about how the Native Americans saw these events. An overriding difficulty with any such research is the great diversity within the Native American population. It is one thing to imagine that economic principles can be used to explain behavior, it is quite another to see how it actually worked out in specific cases across a long time period, a wide spectrum of events, and involving diverse tribes and cultures.

Given the great diversity and long time period, the book attempts to focus on key episodes of Native American economic history and salient issues of the different time periods. The long history is compartmentalized into four periods: Pre-Colonial Civilizations, Trade and Colonial Economies, Westward Expansion, and Twentieth Century Federalism. Each section has a short introduction and two or three articles. Barrington provides a useful overview of Native American history and its relation to U.S. economic history more generally, out of which comes the rationale for the four-part categorization.

Vernon Smith's article covers the entire pre-colonial period, with a sweeping analysis of the role of economic forces and institutions throughout mankind's history. If he is to be believed, economic forces, such as changes in relative costs and accumulation of human capital, explain just about everything, including not only inventions, but also language and bipedalism. To be fair he eventually

allows that bipedalism was a bioeconomic response (p. 72). Much of his story will strike many readers as nothing more than a relabeling of causes. After all, if we do not know what brought about certain changes 5 or 10 million years ago, we might just as well say it was changes in relative costs rather than some biological mutation or climactic disaster. He does, however, make a plausible case for many of the developments that took place, and perhaps we should rightly think of it as economic behavior. At least this will get people to start looking at these sorts of things from a different perspective, with perhaps fruitful results.

As much as I might laud his efforts to recast these long evolutionary developments in economic terms, it is easy to see why many non-economists will be skeptical. Some of the responses, such as the inventions of weapons for big-game hunting or the shift from hunting to agriculture for example, took a very long time to evolve. Along the way not all developments were obviously conscious decisions being made by rational economic agents; they just happened. Indeed, they would not seem to be the sort of calculating economic actions described by Demsetz in which "Property rights develop to internalize externalities when the gains of internalization become larger than the cost of internalization (p. 104)." It is hard to imagine early Cro-Magnon people working these things out in their heads. And, Smith admits that some responses were unconscious (p. 68). As valuable as it might be to now try to describe those unconscious decisions, most non-economists will prefer to think of some of these things as the result of biological evolution, the survival of the fittest, culture factors, or simply chance.

The main thrust of Smith's argument, however, is extremely pertinent and he presents a plausible case for reconsidering enormous and far-distant developments in economic terms. He argues neatly that "culture and institutions can be interpreted as providing the information system for transmitting the learning embodied in the unconscious response to opportunity cost (p. 68)." Although his article has little to do with Native Americans, its value is to set the tone. If way back when economic forces were at work shaping language, culture, and mankind–indeed man–then a fortiori these forces must have influenced Native American behavior. Subsequent essays develop these ideas more fully.

Barrington in "The Mississippians and Economic Development Before European Colonization," argues that in the precolonial period the existence of Indian towns, such as Cahokia, is part of the evidence that not all indigenous societies were hunters and gatherers prior to European contact. Some practiced a sedentary agriculture, and there was long-distance trade, specialization of labor, taxation and social hierarchy. The latter may have had some influence on the subsequent development of the southeastern United States, although the link with slavery seems rather tenuous. Anderson and LaCombe's piece, "Institutional Change in the Indian Horse Culture," delineates carefully how economic behavior must have been manifest in the hunting techniques and how they changed with the introduction of the horse. They also argue that much of this change occurred before there was extensive contact with Europeans.

The essays on the colonial period are both concerned with trade–the fur trade in the North and the skin trade in South Carolina. Carlos and Lewis try to show that Indian behavior that led to the depletion of the beaver stock was not irrational or culturally-determined, but rather was the outcome of a very predictable response to changes in the prices received for beaver, and those changes reflected differences in the competition faced by the Hudson's Bay Company. Murphy puts forth a similar sort of economic argument in "The Eighteenth-Century Southeastern American Indian Economy." To be sure there were political influences at work, but he argues that Indians were clearly motivated by market forces. They were involved in a large commercial hunting market and their production rose and fell as the real price of skins rose and fell. At its peak, the deerskin trade provided export earnings that rivaled those of the Middle colonies, and as prices fell Indians shifted into alternative economic activities.

David Wishart provides compelling evidence that the Cherokee were responding well to economic forces; they were successful farmers and heavily involved in commercial agriculture. In "Could the Cherokee Have Survived in the Southeast?" he uses evidence from a special census of 1835 to show that at least half, and perhaps three-fourths, of Cherokee households were producing substantial agricultural surpluses. From an economic perspective there is little doubt that they could have survived and thus the argument that they were to be removed to Oklahoma for humanitarian reasons seems dubious. For political reasons, however, they might not have been able to survive and for that reason the Removal may have been in their interest. James Oberly presents an interesting and succinct analysis of the demographic history of the Lake Superior Ojibwa in "Land, Population, Prices and the Regulation of Natural Resources." Unlike the other authors he does not stress how this tribe responded to economic forces, but does show that until the late nineteenth century they performed well economically. He

also makes the point that in their treaty negotiations they exhibited astute economic thinking, and had estimated quite accurately the time it would have taken whites to cut the timber on their lands and thus probably had a good idea of the present value of their assets (p. 198). The final essay in the Westward Expansion section is that by Anderson and McChesney, in which they lay out nicely how political economy models can explain the increase in conflict between Indians and whites between 1790 and 1897, much of which can be traced to the acquisition of the horse which turned otherwise sedentary tribes into nomads. As Smith put it, "For a century and a half the history of the American West was a history of fear and terror of the Comanche, who, prior to the arrival of the mustang, had picked berries and dug roots (p. 75)."

The twentieth century economic history of Indians is primarily that of Federalism. Leonard Carlson provides a succinct history of the key elements of the Indian-government relations and then analyzes more thoroughly the allotment program and irrigation policies that were in place between the passage of the Dawes Act (1887) and the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. He uses a public choice approach to show that these programs and policies did not work primarily for the benefit of the Indians. Although some Indians did benefit, there was also a waste of resources, and perhaps more noteworthy, a transfer of resources to bureaucrats in the Bureau of Indian Affairs and to non-Indian ranchers and farmers. LaCroix and Rose come to similar conclusions regarding the Hawaiian Home Lands Program. Both of these papers raise the specter of some counterfactual analysis, but do not pursue such inquiries in these papers. Carlson notes how difficult it would be to imagine what alternative organizational scheme might have worked better than relying on newly formed tribal councils (p. 254). LaCroix and Rose elsewhere propose some reforms of the HHL program, implying they have in mind some counterfactual that might work better, but they are skeptical that any such reforms will be adopted soon.

In all this is a useful book, setting out pertinent issues and showing the sorts of analysis that can be applied. It also makes clear that careful economic analysis of Native American issues is in its infancy, with much room to grow. All of these pieces have been written within the last five years, and they are among the best there is.

Copyright (c) 1999 by EH.NET and H-Net. All rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational uses if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact the EH.NET Administrator. (administrator@eh.net; Telephone: 513-529-2850; Fax: 513-529-3308).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Thomas Weiss. Review of Barrington, Linda, ed., *The Other Side of the Frontier: Economic Explorations into Native American History.* EH.Net, H-Net Reviews. January, 1999.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2663

Copyright © 1999, EH.Net and H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission questions, please contact the EH.NET Administrator (administrator@eh.net; Telephone: 513-529-2850; Fax: 513-529-3309). Published by EH.NET.