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Review of *Rich Indians: Native People and the Problem of Wealth in American History* by Alexandra Harmon

Kathleen Pickering Sherman
Colorado State University

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Rich Indians: Native People and the Problem of Wealth in American History. By Alexandra Harmon. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. x + 388 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95.

Across American history, Native American tribes were impoverished through land and natural resource appropriations accomplished through a wide variety of well-documented political, military, and cultural means. Alexandra Harmon, in her book, provocatively titled *Rich Indians*, focuses on a handful of exceptions to this statistical pattern to explore American discourses about wealth accumulation by Native Americans. Armed with an impressive collection of primary sources, as well as literature from history and anthropology, Harmon also uncovers parallel discourses by Native Americans themselves about wealth accumulation among their own peoples. The result is a complex, multilayered, and fascinating mélange of contradictory attitudes and beliefs that simultaneously promote and disparage the efforts of these “rich Indians.”

This book is an original window into an otherwise exceptional and obscured Native American experience in America. The Native Americans Harmon identifies as “rich,” such as Joseph Brant, Alexander McGillivray, Mary Bosomworth, James Vann, and Major Ridge, are intriguing combinations of American ingenuity and tribal traditions. Often confronted by Natives and non-Natives alike for stepping outside the narrow bounds of acceptability for Native Americans, their personal histories are classic struggles with Gregory Bateson’s concept of the double bind: too white if they accumulate wealth for themselves; too Native if they redistribute their wealth for tribal concerns beyond their own immediate family. Their unique individual journeys provide Harmon with the opportunity to search largely uncharted territories in Native American history, including Native American entrepreneurship, race, and economic morality in America, as well as more familiar but knotty themes surrounding cultural continuity and change.

The author amply supports her thesis that Americans hold conflicting ideals of wealth accumulation generally, and particularly when applied to American Indians. In the end, the desire of Americans of European ancestry to enrich themselves at the expense of the Indigenous peoples of North America appears to outweigh the American celebration of entrepreneurial spirit and self-made individuals.

While the book addresses all Native Americans, the most extensive focus is on the Powhatans at contact; the Five Civilized Tribes, especially the Creeks and Cherokees, at various points in history; the Osages in Oklahoma during the 1920s oil boom; and several contemporary casino tribes. Harmon successfully reconstructs debates internal to these particular tribal communities about tradition, generosity, and the problem of wealth accumulation from contact to today by masterfully managing the chronic problem of Native American perspectives and the written historical record. While the record from white America is more abundant, Harmon maintains a welcome balance with Native American perspectives, a feat that has often been difficult to accomplish in American history.

In the effort to lay claim to all Native Americans, there are times when the book portrays them as a seemingly homogeneous group in relation to values regarding wealth, generosity, and the acceptance of inequality and hierarchy. While these generalizations fit for the most part with the primary case studies in the book, they run the danger of masking the broad spectrum of tribal values with respect to wealth in the precontact period, from extreme egalitarian societies to extensively hierarchical ones characterized by nobility and a slave class. This problem is most marked in the attempt to determine if the imposition of a market economy and capitalist values was responsible for altering tribal values concerning reciprocity and redistribution, when the only accurate answer would be "it depends." A more theoretical treatment both of the types of preexisting Native economies and of the historically contingent content of American capitalist values

would help sharpen the question of whether "rich Indians" represent an abandonment of traditional moral values under white tutelage, or an adaptation of ongoing traditional values simply applied to new economic circumstances.

Overall, this book is an excellent addition to our understanding of Indian-white relations, and an original approach to challenging common assumptions about Native poverty and the desire of Americans to see that poverty end. It will be a stimulating read for historians, anthropologists, and Native scholars alike.

KATHLEEN PICKERING SHERMAN
Department of Anthropology
Colorado State University