Part IV

Development and underdevelopment
9. Indigeneity and incorporation
Early capitalist inauguration and the formation of a colonial shatter zone

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Scholars now understand that the time of early European colonialism in the late sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries were a time of a profound social transformation among the Native people of the southern United States. The Native people who stood on either side of this great transformational divide were organized into quite different kinds of societies. The Indians of the eighteenth-century South are the ones familiar to most people and whose descendants are recognized today as the Creeks, the Cherokees, the Chickasaws, the Choctaws, the Catawbas, and so on. We now know that these societies formed out of survivors of the polities of the sixteenth-century precontact world—Coosa, Mabila, Pacaha, Chicaza, Cofitachequi, and others—as they broke apart in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We still do not have an adequate vocabulary to describe the Native societies of the eighteenth century. They have been called “con federacies,” “tribes,” “nations,” and so on. We now generally call them “coalescent societies” because they were all, to varying degrees, coalescences of people from different societies, cultures, and languages who relocated and banded together after the fall of their polities (Hudson and Ethridge 1998).

On the other side of this transformational divide, the ancestors of the eighteenth-century Southern Indians were organized into what archaeologists call “chiefdoms.” A chiefdom is a particular kind of political and social type characterized by a ranked social order of ruling elite lineages and nonelite lineages. Chiefdoms were the prevailing political unit in much of the South during the time known as the Mississippi Period (900 CE to 1700 CE). It was during the Mississippi Period that people of the chiefdoms built the flat-topped earthen temple mounds that one still finds throughout the American South. The chiefdoms in a region were tied together in myriad ways—ecologically, politically, socially, economically, and religiously. Although the exact nature of these ties has yet to be fully explained, they served to integrate these ancient chiefdoms of the South into a single world which has come to be known as the “Mississippian world.”

The disturbances in the American South in the first 175 years of European colonization, between 1540 and 1715, have not been difficult to identify. The archaeological and documentary evidence attests to the disappearance of Native chiefdoms, movements of people into tightly compacted and heavily fortified towns, a dramatic loss of life, multiple migrations and splintering of groups, the coalescence of some groups, the disappearance of many others, and an overall decline in Native artistic life (Ethridge 2010; Ethridge and Hudson 2002; Ethridge and Shuck-Hall 2009; Galloway 1995; Hudson and Tesser 1994). We are beginning to understand that the
Mississippian world did not fall asunder in one fell swoop. Rather, there was a more piecemeal disintegration and reorganization, as chiefdoms fell and people regrouped—and sometimes regrouped again—over the full span of almost 200 years. The full transformation of the Mississippian world, then, must be placed within an interpretive framework against which each instance of collapse and restructuring can be placed.

I have begun constructing such a framework, one that has come to be known as the “Mississippian shatter zone” (Ethridge 2006, 2009a). The Mississippian shatter zone was a large region of instability in eastern North America that existed from the late sixteenth century through the early eighteenth century. It was created by the combined conditions of: (1) the inherent structural instabilities of the Mississippian chiefdoms; (2) the introduction of Old World pathogens and the subsequent serial disease episodes and loss of life; (3) the inauguration of a nascent capitalist economic system by Europeans through a commercial trade in Indian slaves and animal skins; and (4) the intensification and spread of violence and warfare through the Indian slave trade and especially through the emergence of militaristic Native slaving societies, who sought a larger share of the European trade (Ethridge 2006: 208–09, 2009a: 2).

Because the fall of the Mississippian world is at the core of the Mississippian shatter zone concept, the history of its collapse sets the chronological parameters. Some chiefdoms, such as Apalachee, Natchez, and Caddo functioned into the eighteenth century, although how closely these resembled Mississippian chiefdoms is in question. Others, such as the paramount chiefdom of Coosa, fell by 1600. Such a broad temporal span is necessary to cover the complete collapse of the Mississippian world and the full reorganization of the geopolitical landscape that followed. The Mississippian shatter zone then is defined here by the chronological and spatial parameters of the Mississippian world, distinguishing it as a particular historical case. This is not to say, however, that the Mississippian shatter zone was the only shatter zone created in the early years of colonialism. Rather, I am attempting to distinguish this as one particular case of instability. Future comparative work with other places of colonial instability may find some similarities between them and the Mississippian shatter zone.

**Structural instabilities of Mississippian chiefdoms**

Mississippian chiefdoms were not uniformly alike across space and time. Archaeologists understand the classic Mississippian chiefdoms such as Cahokia and Moundville to have been quite large and complex. A “complex chiefdom” is a political designation for chiefdoms in which one large chiefdom exercised some sort of control or influence over smaller chiefdoms within a defined area. Archaeologists call the smaller chiefdoms, “simple chiefdoms,” in that they were polities in which the elites only controlled the towns connected to that chiefdom (Anderson 1994: 4–9; Steponaitis 1978).

In the Late Mississippi Period, complex and simple chiefdoms existed side by side, in a few cases single and especially charismatic leaders forged an alliance of several complex and simple chiefdoms into “paramount chiefdoms.” Archaeologists are not in agreement as to the specific organizational mechanisms that held a paramount chiefdom together. Whereas one can think of a simple chiefdom as a “hands-on, workaday administrative unit under the aegis of a particular chief, the paramount chiefdom may have been little more than a kind of non-aggression pact, and the power of a paramount chief may have been little more than that of first among equals”(Hudson et al 2008: 467). Paramount chiefdoms were political entities that could have ranged from strongly to weakly integrated and paramount chiefs possessed power or influence. The concept of the paramount chiefdom implies a less centralized administration than a large, statelike organization, but possessing a larger area of geographic influence than that of simple or

Archaeological evidence indicates the occurrence of a pattern of cycling in complex and simple chiefdoms—a seeming endemic rise and fall of chiefdoms through time (Anderson 1994: 1–52; Blitz 1999: 583–90). How and why Mississippian chiefdoms rose and fell is still poorly understood. Certain stresses, such as soil exhaustion, drought, depletion of core resources, military defeats, and contested claims to the chieftainship may have constituted proximate causes for collapse. However, archaeologists generally agree that within the structure of a chiefdom, there also were structural instabilities, most likely those associated with chiefly power, authority, and political succession (Anderson 1994: 1–52; Blitz 1993: 12–13, 1999: 583–90; Hally 1993, 1996, 2006: 33–37; Scarry 1996; Williams 1990; Worth 2003).

When Europeans came into the American South, they penetrated the Mississippian world. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, European sailors explored portions of the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico coastlines, but European colonial efforts to settle North America did not begin until the early 1500s, with the largest effort being that of Hernando de Soto, who launched his expedition in 1539. Landing in present-day Tampa, Florida, and moving north, Soto’s expedition explored the Southern heartland but failed in its objective of establishing a colony. At the time of Soto’s entrada there were dozens of chiefdoms in the South, many of which Soto and his army encountered (Hudson 1990, 1997). Soto’s expedition came as a conquering army, and in the cases of those chiefdoms that saw intense action, the direct military assault of the Spanish may have precipitated their collapse (Ethridge 2010: 60–88; Hudson 1997: 110–15, 238–49, 266–74, 336–38).

Soto’s prolonged stay and ransacking of the region for food would also have had quite serious repercussions. When Soto and his army of 600-plus men trekked through the Southern interior, they depended on the food stores of Native people. Soto’s presence in any polity resulted in depleted local stores as well as depletion of any emergency surpluses. Although Mississippian people knew much about utilizing wild plant and animal foods, such a shortage of stored cultivated crops would have meant hardship for all and starvation for some. In addition, the leadership of these chiefdoms partly derived from being able to procure and secure stores of food for just such emergencies, and if the leadership failed on this count, these polities must also have been subjected to political unrest (Blitz 1993: 69–97, 123–25, 176–78, 180–81; Ethridge 2010: 60–88; Wesson 1999: 157–58).

It is also likely that Soto’s presence upset the balance of power in some complex and paramount chiefdoms. Records from the expedition describe several instances in which the micos (or rulers) of simple chiefdoms challenged and defied the authority of a chief under whose power they had fallen. In these political struggles, the more powerful mico often enlisted Soto’s influence and military aid to prevail against the rebellion. In some, a savvy lesser mico used Soto to bolster his authority in challenging the overarching mico. In either case, given the fragile nature of the ties binding complex and paramount chiefdoms, the presence of a new and powerful ally could have easily upset the balance of power, resulting in a reshuffling of authority among these chiefdoms (Ethridge 2010: 60–88; Hudson 1997: 179–80, 228–29).

The introduction of old world diseases

After the Soto entrada, Spain managed to plant a small colony in North America—St. Augustine—and to institute their mission strategy for colonization whereby missionaries labored to convert indigenous people into Spanish peasants. The Spanish presence in present-day Florida inaugurated many exchanges with Native peoples, culturally, socially, and materially. It also intensified the
French and English scouting of North America. With increasing contact between Indians and Europeans, Old World diseases began to circulate through the American South. Until recently, scholars attributed the collapse of Native societies across the Americas at the time of contact to the introduction of Old World diseases into virgin soil populations and a resultant demographic collapse on the order of 90 percent. They also understood this demographic collapse to have occurred before sustained European contact. Today, scholars still accept a 90 percent loss of life, but this loss now appears to have occurred over about 200 years in a gradual, not steep, demographic decline and only after sustained European contact (Alchon 2002). In the American South, for example, the Indians of Spanish Florida had the most prolonged and direct contact with Europeans from about 1550 to 1715. Although there is plenty of documentary evidence for epidemic disease episodes in Spanish Florida, there is no evidence for a catastrophic loss of life across the region. Rather, epidemics were localized occurrences, albeit with high mortality rates (Ethridge 2009a: 10–13). In addition, there was no sweeping cultural upheaval between 1550 and 1700 in La Florida. The chiefdoms continued to function into the eighteenth century and adjusted to the presence of the Spanish in various ways. The chiefdoms of Spanish Florida fell not because of disease or because of the Spanish presence, but because of the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century commercial and English-sponsored slaving campaigns of Indian groups such as the Westos, Yamasees, Apalachees, and others. Today, scholars agree that disease was but one factor in the collapse of Native societies and the demographic decline, and they now point to contributing factors such as slaving, internecine warfare, dropping fertility rates, violent colonial strategies such as genocide, and general cultural and social malaise from colonial oppression (Alchon 2002; Dye 2002: 137–38; Ethridge 2010; Ethridge and Shuck-Hall 2009; Galloway 1995: 134–41, 159–63; Kelton 2007, 2009; Worth 1998, v. 2: 1–37, 2009).

Inauguration of the capitalist economic system

Certainly the structural instabilities of the Mississippian chiefdoms, the introduction of Old World disease epidemics, and cultural exchanges with early Spaniards had profound effects on Native life. But these instabilities, epidemics, and exchanges in and of themselves were not transforming. Not until Native peoples became engaged in the world-economy through contact with the English, French, and Dutch did they revamp their social, political, and economic orders to adapt to this system (Boswell and Chase-Dunn 2000: 17–50; Hollis 2005: 121; Hudson and Ethridge 1998).

Spain and Portugal were core areas during the late fifteenth and early to mid-sixteenth centuries, but their prominence in the global economy was eclipsed by the Netherlands by the late sixteenth century. Dutch interests lay in India and Asia rather than in the Atlantic, and by the time Dutch attention turned to North America in the early seventeenth century, they had to vie with England and France for economic hegemony (Boswell and Chase-Dunn 2000: 39, Table 1.3). By the late seventeenth century, France and England were in a contest for the Atlantic arena, with England finally emerging as the core area by the early eighteenth century.

Who were these Europeans and what sorts of ties to their homelands did they bring with them? This has been a central question in American colonial history almost from its inception. In the context of world-systems analysis, during the seventeenth century, key European core countries (primarily the Netherlands and England in competition with declining Spain and Portugal) were knitting together a global economy by articulating economic circuits, such as the Atlantic trade circuit with the Asian trade circuit. Although the American colonies were in the Atlantic circuit, they were still a subset of the larger global economy (Coclain 2005; Gallay 2009). In this light, by the seventeenth century, the American colonies were strategic commercial outposts situated in a global periphery through which European core countries extracted labor and resources.
The North American overseas ventures were largely one set of commercial endeavors among a host of many others that crisscrossed the globe. The North American settlements served mostly as extractive trade factories, at least in the first 100 years or so. These settlements may have been small and overwhelmed by Indian populations, but they were one conduit through which the economic power of the core countries flowed. Hence, one should not look on the American colonies and colonists themselves as wielding extraordinary transforming power over Native life, but rather it was the system in which they served that was so transformative. It was not Quebec, New Amsterdam, Jamestown, or Charles Town that created the shatter zone; it was the global commercial power of the Netherlands, England, and France as funneled through these settlements (Ethridge 2009a: 18–19; Gallay 2009).

Many of the European men and women who first came to eastern North America understood themselves to be embarking on commercial enterprises through which they hoped to gain wealth and prestige. Most of them had much prior experience working for international military and commercial enterprises and with European trade companies in other areas of the world, and they brought these experiences to North America. They accepted that this business was not for the faint of heart, and they knew that real dangers awaited them. Nor were they all novices in dealing with people different from themselves, and the most enterprising, such as John Smith of Virginia and the South Carolina slaver Henry Woodward, had experience in other cultures and good linguistic and negotiating skills. They also had some ideas about how to engage the locals in trade, especially through the sale of armaments, and they had a good sense for commodities, in this case animal skins and Indian slaves (Ethridge 2009a: 19).

Slavery was not completely new to North American Indians at contact, as most Native groups practiced an indigenous form of slavery in which war captives were sometimes put into bondage. Large-scale captive-taking, as occurred during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, however, was most likely not conducted during the Mississippi Period but came about with the colonial commercial slave trade. Hence, the forms of bondage during the Historic Period that Europeans observed did not exist in the Mississippi Period (Snyder 2010).

A few decades into the colonial Indian slave trade, many Southern Indian groups were responding to a powerful dynamic by which the commercial trade in Indian slaves worked. In this dynamic, Indian men incurred debts when they accepted guns, ammunition, metal tools, and other items from European traders. European traders in turn requested that the debt be paid in slaves and furs and skins. Armed with European-manufactured weapons, Indian groups raided rival groups for slaves. Members of the unarmed group would then have to acquire guns with which to defend themselves, and they in turn would become slave raiders. The result was a vicious cycle of slaving, trading, and weapons escalation (Ethridge 2010; Ethridge and Shuck-Hall 2009; Gallay 2002: 40–52; Hudson and Ethridge 1998: 41–42).

**The spread of violence and warfare**

The Mississippian shatter zone, as the name implies, takes violence to be attendant to imperialism and the birth of the early modern world. It also takes violence to be part and parcel of capitalist incorporation as theorized by Brian Ferguson and Neil Whitehead in *War in the Tribal Zone* (1992a). Ferguson and Whitehead (1992a) have begun to devise a theoretical framework for understanding the historical context of indigenous violence. They argue that one general result of state expansion and capitalist incorporation is the militarization of indigenous peoples through an increase, intensification, and transformation of indigenous warfare on the edges of empire, or the “tribal zone.” Ferguson and Whitehead, however, do not understand indigenous people to be victims of expanding states. They insist that in addition to the colonizers’ violence, indigenous
people who lived and participated in the colonial world also contributed to and sometimes created colonial violence. They point out that this is especially true when indigenous people became involved in commercial slave trading.

Of all the types of colonial commerce, the commercial trade in slaves requires a high level of force as a necessary accompaniment to trade (Ferguson and Whitehead 1992b: 23). In other words, whereas trading in furs or deerskins does not necessarily involve warfare, trading in slaves does because it requires force. Certainly, warfare penetrated Mississippian life, so much so that war, not peace, may have been the accepted state of affairs. Once Europeans arrived, however, one can see that Native war efforts became entwined with market interests and international commerce (Dye 2002). As warfare became tied to commercial interests, the Mississippian chiefdoms’ mechanisms for mitigating war and brokering peace broke down, meaning that as Indian commercial interests in the colonial Indian slave trade intensified, so did warfare and the militarization of those Native groups who sought to control the trade (Ethridge 2009a: 20–21).

Ferguson and Whitehead (1992b) argue that once indigenous people became involved in European trade, colonial politics, and military agendas, indigenous warfare became directed by elements outside of a purely Native world. Access to European trade goods, control over the supply and distribution of Indian slaves and trade goods, the use of indigenous mercenaries by the colonizers, as well as mutual military, political, and economic manipulation of each other by Europeans and indigenous inhabitants, all began to figure into indigenous motivations for and strategies of war. In the American South, one can see that the trade in Indian slaves intensified warfare and folded precontact motivations for war such as revenge and retaliation into burgeoning commercial interests (Dye 2002). The result in some cases was the emergence of what I have termed militaristic slaving societies (Ethridge 2006: 108–9, 2009a: 24–25, 2009b; Ferguson and Whitehead 1992b: 18–28). Militaristic slaving societies were Indian societies that gained control of the trade and “through their slave raiding, spread internecine warfare and created widespread dislocation, migration, amalgamation, and, in some cases, extinction of Native peoples” (Ethridge 2006: 208–09). Most of these militaristic slaving societies were short lived, existing for only about 100 years—from 1620 to 1720. During this brief window of time, they were key agents in the creation and expansion of the Mississippian shatter zone through a relentless raiding of their Indian neighbors for slaves.

The Mississippian shatter zone takes the Indian slave trade to be primarily a commercial venture with violence and internecine warfare as part and parcel of the slaving business. In other words, in the Mississippian shatter zone, the commercial trade in Indian slaves was not a continuation and adaptation of preexisting captivity patterns; it was a new kind of slaving, requiring a new kind of occupation created on the edge of the modern world-system—that of organized militaristic slavers. The capture and sale of Indian slaves did not serve to weld a world together; rather, Indian slaving was one of the hammers that shattered the world in which they themselves existed (Ethridge 2009a: 24–26, 2010).

**Conclusion**

By 1715, with almost 90 percent of the indigenous peoples of the American South either enslaved, killed by disease or in slave raids, and with the survivors living close to or among Europeans or grouped into formidable coalescent societies such as the Creeks, Cherokees, Chickasaws, Catawbas, and Choctaws, the supply of Indian slaves dwindled and the trade in Indian slaves faltered. Three conflagrations—the Tuscarora War of 1712, the Yamasee War of 1715, and the Natchez Revolt of 1729 signaled not only the end of the slave trade era but also the collapse of the last chiefdom that retained vestiges of its Mississippian roots.
By 1715 a new colonial South was emerging. Gone were all the many polities that Soto saw, replaced by large Indian “nations.” In this new South, Indians were fully engaged in the global trade system. Cloth, guns, metal tools, and other items were as common and necessary to Indians as they were to Europeans. Only now, the Indian trade was not in slaves but in deerskins, and instead of slave raiders, most of the men became commercial hunters. The new South of 1715 was born out of the Mississippian shatter zone. The Mississippian chiefdoms, structured to rise and fall, fell spectacularly with European contact, and they failed to rise again because of the turmoil and wide regional instability created by the introduction of Old World diseases and the increased violence and disruptions from the commercial trade in Indian slaves. Faced with the collapse of their chiefdoms, people invented new ways of putting their social lives back together, ways that sought to adapt to a field of play with nation states and a global capitalist economy.

In 1540 Indian life was lived out in a purely Indian world; by 1715 it was lived out on the edge of an expanding and conflict-ridden European world and in a new social landscape that included not only Indians but also Europeans and Africans. The first 200 years of European colonization of the American South, then, is a story about the collision of two worlds—the emerging modern world of Europe and its American colonies and the centuries-old Mississippian world. The meeting of these two worlds was not peaceful or orderly, and it was marked by warfare, violence, struggle, disease, and hardship for all involved. There can be little doubt that eventually the European world prevailed over the Mississippian world. But the meeting also opened new opportunities, new possibilities, and new ways of doing things for both Natives and newcomers. The result was a transformation of both worlds and a melding of both into the modern world-system.

References


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