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Review by Maeve Kane, University at Albany, State University of New York

In “‘No Useless Mouth’: Iroquois Food Diplomacy in the American Revolution,” Rachel Herrmann offers a cogent analysis of the rhetoric and reality of food negotiations in eighteenth century Indian diplomacy. Food diplomacy, Herrmann notes, differs from crisis food aid or high-politics gastrodipomacy because food diplomacy encompasses governmental alliance making, the everyday maneuvering of individuals, and the often unappetizing nature of eighteenth century provisions. Herrmann also argues that because food is a basic, intimate human necessity, the rhetoric of starvation, hunger, and sustenance frequently seen in eighteenth century Indian diplomacy is often difficult for scholars to interpret even though the rhetoric of hunger and starvation is a historically contingent one like any other. Herrmann’s analysis is situated in a broader realignment in recent studies of Iroquois history which questions declension narratives and emphasizes resilience and continuity. And yet, as Herrmann points out, the literature still largely approaches the American Revolution as a disastrous breaking point in which post-war Iroquois land losses overshadow all else. The ‘skeptical’ reading of food requests that Herrmann provides offers new insights into the creative misunderstandings of cross-cultural interaction, the nuances of seemingly straightforward rhetorics of starvation and hunger, and the strategies Native people pursued to reach their own goals during and after the American Revolution.

The Six Nations of the Iroquois which Herrmann examines include the Mohawks, the Oneidas, the Tuscaroras, the Cayugas, the Onondagas, and the Senecas, the total population of which Herrmann estimates at between 6,400 and 10,000 by the 1760s (23). Iroquois territories dwarfed those of colonial New York, stretching from the Mohawk Valley just west of Albany to the shores of Lake Ontario and Lake Erie.

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Herrmann provides a succinct overview of the cultural principles governing intra-Iroquois and Iroquois-European diplomacy, including mutual nonaggression between Iroquois nations even when allied to opposing European powers, and mutual non-interference between Iroquois and Europeans. Shared diplomatic protocols evolved following Iroquois forms, including the distribution of trade goods and food, despite European frustrations with the cost and slow pace of negotiations.

Gift-giving occupied a central place in maintaining middle ground alliances between Iroquois communities and European settlements, repeatedly solidifying alliances and establishing exchange partners as equal and interdependent. Food, while part of these exchanges of goods and wampum, proved especially tricky for Iroquois and Europeans to rhetorically navigate because Native guests were expected to exaggerate their need in food requests so hosts who gave food would not appear proud, while Britons conflated trade goods like powder with provisions (28-29). Food also functioned as a barometer of relations, with Europeans agonizing over the amount of provisions they were able to offer allies during times when their own posts went hungry, and Iroquois settlements storing caches of food against times of war or sheltering neighboring communities during times of scarcity.

Provisioning in eighteenth century Iroquois-European relations was a diplomatic act, not a charitable one, part of the metaphorical act of allies eating from “one dish and one spoon” even as Iroquois warriors and noncombatants continued to be supplied from stored caches during times of scarcity. The turmoil of the 1760s and imperial competition increased the importance of food, with the British making more and more frequent gifts to woo the neutral Iroquois as French metropolitan austerity measures hindered their ability to court Native allies. This is not to say that relations were always smooth; the cost of food diplomacy drew complaints from British officials like Jeffrey Amherst who saw food as part of a commodity exchange for services as well as Iroquois leaders frustrated with British refusal to adhere to established norms of reciprocity. The British construct of the dependent, hungry Indian coexisted alongside the idea of the self-sufficient Indian, creating tension in the years leading up to the American Revolution.

The established protocols of food diplomacy assumed even greater importance in the early years of the war as British and Americans attempted to court Indian allies, or at least persuade them to neutrality. Difficulties obtaining provisions plagued both the British and the Americans, both for their own troops and the American-allied Oneidas and Tuscaroras and British-allied Cayugas, Mohawks, Onondagas, and Senecas. Spoilage, shipping difficulties, increased costs, and diversions of supplies to white troops all hampered food distributions, but Iroquois food caches kept by clan matrons supplied sufficient provisions to prevent real trouble. Food diplomacy nevertheless remained an important part of the gift economy which solidified relations, with British officials feeling pressure not only to provision Indians but also buy whatever “cattle the Indians had to spare” lest the offense cause them to join the rebels (38). Americans, for their part, attempted to excuse their difficulties distributing food gifts by framing their conflict with the British in the familiar terms of the disintegrating common dish, in which the British refused to share the fruits of a common labor. Food gifts to the Iroquois remained largely symbolic, with American-allied Oneida villages supplying troops at Valley Forge and continuing to provision their own while for the most part refusing to despoil the food stores of other Iroquois settlements in a continuation of the principal of mutual non-aggression.

The 1779 American attack against British-allied Iroquois settlements was, Herrmann argues, a decisive break in the food diplomacy of the period. Iroquois stores were already depleted from earlier attacks, and for the duration of the summer a three-pronged attack focused on the “total destruction” of Iroquois settlements. In what has become known as the Sullivan campaign, American troops razed dozens of settlements and put to
the torch hundreds of thousands of bushels of standing and stored corn. More than 5,000 Iroquois as well as other Native people fled to British Niagara, causing Governor of Quebec Frederick Haldimand to fret over the cost in late 1779 and resolve by the winter of 1780 that as many Indians as possible must be sent away from the fort. Herrmann observes that unlike seventeenth century French attacks which destroyed Iroquois food stores and fields, the 1779 campaign resulted in an increase of British provisioning of both Iroquois warriors and noncombatants, as well as a shift in Iroquois rhetoric surrounding hunger and food requests. In earlier periods of food scarcity, British colonial officials had not offered food aid and Iroquois displaced by scarcity resettled with other Iroquois communities; the Sullivan campaign shifted British food gifts from symbolic provisioning to significant support of a large seasonal population.

British attempts to curtail costs by pushing “useless mouths” away from forts prompted Iroquois critiques of the British as themselves obsessed with nothing but food, declaring that Iroquois communities would remain together and continue the fight with or without British provisions. As the British broke with earlier protocol of gift-giving, Iroquois leaders broke with the rhetorical protocol of professing hunger and pushed back against British perceptions of hungry, dependent Indians. British-allied Iroquois warriors destroyed captured food stores and livestock, a direct counterpoint to a scholarly literature which has emphasized Indian hunger in the years following 1779. Herrmann argues that Haldimand’s attempt to curtail Indian costs and Indian hunger had the unintended consequence of actually increasing British expenses—the cost of supplying Niagara alone increased two hundred fold over the course of the war. Rather than the hungry, dependent Indians envisioned by the British, Iroquois communities shifted their rhetoric and ignored their hunger in order to pursue military and political goals while British officials increased food gifts in order to retain crucial Native allies.

The analytical framework of “unintended consequences” has both its benefits and its drawbacks. The diplomatic space Herrmann examines was one of cross-cultural misunderstandings and confusion over shared metaphors with different meanings, and the lens of unintended consequences offers a productive way of examining these misunderstandings from a necessarily one-sided source base. Herrmann clearly outlines the difficulties of understanding indigenous motivations from archival materials created by British and American writers who often did not fully comprehend the actions of Native allies and enemies which they reported. The lens of unintended consequences provides a convincing framework for Herrmann’s analysis of failed British attempts to curtail food aid to Iroquois allies in the late years of the American Revolution. However, the framework of unintended consequences and emphasis on cross-cultural misunderstandings at times frames indigenous motivations as unknowable; the problem of interpreting Native peoples’ motivations and intent from scant documentation is one ethnohistorians have been struggling with for several decades. When Iroquois warriors destroyed livestock during moments of food scarcity, Herrmann argues that it is “impossible to say what Natives were thinking during these moments” (27) and that Iroquois “actions were diplomatic, regardless of their intentions” (21). While I fully appreciate the difficulty of reconstructing Native actors’

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intentions from records created by uninformed and often unsympathetic European observers, a scholarly assessment of the available evidence may have offered a richer analysis of diplomatic concerns from both Native and European perspectives.

Discussion of gender may also prove fruitful for future work in indigenous-European food diplomacy, especially with respect to the gendered political economy of Iroquois food production. Although, as Herrmann observes, Iroquois women produced the majority of the communities’ food supplies and matrilineages controlled the homes, fields, and food caches that were destroyed, gender does not figure in the discussion of the Sullivan campaign’s impact on food scarcity, “Indian hunger,” and changes in food diplomacy. While a full consideration of the impact of the attack on Iroquois women’s property would have been beyond the scope of Herrmann’s focus on food diplomacy, the gendered structure of Iroquois food production was so central that it begs the question what, if any, perception of gendered food production played in the American decision to target women’s fields. One also wonders at the gender of the “useless mouths” British officials agonized about feeding in the wake of the Sullivan campaign as Iroquois women, children, and other non-combatants fled to British Niagara for shelter.

Beyond these minor points, Herrmann’s piece is a well-researched addition to the scholarship of diplomatic rhetoric and offers a convincing rebuttal to narratives of inevitable Indian decline in the wake of the American Revolution. In the post-war years, Herrmann argues that Iroquois-American negotiations show not only resilience, as the literature has long acknowledged, but also continuity in food diplomacy protocols despite American attempts to curtail spending. While food diplomacy held an integral place in maintaining Iroquois-European alliances before the American Revolution, the 1779 Sullivan campaign prompted a shift in Iroquois diplomatic rhetoric to reject British constructions of the hungry, dependent Indian while pushing British officials to continue providing food aid. By emphasizing the historical contingency of hunger rhetoric, Herrmann offers a fresh perspective on cross-cultural exchange and constructions of food aid by both the giver and receiver. Equating assertions of hunger with powerlessness, Herrmann argues, ignores the ways in which the absence of food and rhetorics of hunger have been used to navigate diplomatic relations or offer pointed critiques.

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