



Indigenous Americans and Globalization

Indigenous Americans have played an important role in globalization since the beginning of the Columbian Exchange. Cultural and economic influences flowed both ways across the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. This video addresses some misconceptions about globalization and explores how the processes of globalization affected indigenous communities. In exploring these changes, the video challenges the misconception that globalization is always a good, progressive process.



00:01

*Robert Keith Collins,
PhD, San Francisco State
University
Drawing of Indigenous
people in conversation
with white settlers;
Photo montage of
indigenous peoples in
America*

When Americans think about globalization, we think of trade and economic influence between nations. What we may forget is that indigenous nations have actively participated in these economic practices, particularly the production of goods and services. We also tend to misunderstand how the cultural changes that these indigenous nations experienced affected them. They were not destroyed by exposure to other ways of life. Rather, they were able to both maintain their own cultures and contribute their ideas, goods, and resources to other communities.

00:52

*Text: “Was globalization
good or bad?”
“How did indigenous
people respond to
globalization?”*

Understanding this phenomenon requires a journey between past and present, between African and European encounters with the Americas’ indigenous crops, materials, knowledge, and economies that caused this impact. To what extent was globalization both bad and good for indigenous nations? How did indigenous peoples cope with this inconsistency, collectively and as individuals?

01:21

*Indigenous people sitting
around a fire with white
settlers; photo of a protest
fighting climate change*

Historians have found a lot of evidence showing how indigenous American nations impacted African and European cultures in profound ways. The histories they’ve written show us that indigenous Americans were active participants in globalization. They also point us to some of the problems that globalization brings up. A closer look at indigenous communities and individuals in the Americas can help us dispel two misconceptions. The first is the idea that globalization is a one-way affair, which it certainly is not, and the second is the misunderstanding that globalization is always beneficial.

02:03

*Photo of Chamberlain’s
text*

Let’s start with the first. Globalization isn’t a top-down force that influenced indigenous people—they had a role, too. This realization isn’t new, though many people haven’t encountered it. Historians have discussed indigenous international influence before—but they didn’t always describe it terms of globalization. In 1903, for example, the Canadian anthropologist Alexander Francis Chamberlain wrote a study about indigenous influence. In it, he wrote that he wanted to tell his reader, “What we owe to the race “from whom we have snatched a continent. And the debt is, indeed, great.”

02:50

*Photos of plants and crops:
corn, potatoes, cacao
beans; tobacco, a rubber
tree*

What does this debt include? One of the first things that comes to mind is a set of crops cultivated by indigenous Americans. They include food crops like corn, potatoes, cacao beans, tomatoes, vanilla, peppers, cassava, and maple, and non-food crops like cotton, tobacco, and rubber. In addition to cultivating these crops, indigenous Americans came up with systems to produce goods and distribute them. In Canada, for example, the Ojibwa and other nations were at the center of the maple trade. This was so lucrative that the maple leaf came to represent the Canadian nation.

03:29

*Artwork depicting the
grinding of corn*

These key goods were not the only things they exchanged. Indigenous Americans also distributed their knowledge and culture. They knew how to process foods like corn to make them more nutritious. Spreading that knowledge was as significant as the corn itself. Other nations also shared medicinal technologies and

Text: "Scurvy: malnourishment caused by a lack of vitamin C"
Word examples: Avocado; Hammock; Kayak; Toboggan; Poncho; Squash; Totem; Hurricane; Canoe; Barbeque

04:28

Text: "Iroquois Confederacy: a political federation of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca, beginning in the 16th century"

04:55

Image of the document that regulated trade between colonists and indigenous Americans.

06:09

Painting of Paul Cuffee Jr.; he is standing in front of the sea

Painting of two large sailboats in the water, next to a (much larger) whale!

information about how to prevent diseases like scurvy. Indigenous Americans also influenced language, daily life, and politics. Over 2,000 English words have indigenous American origins. With English fast becoming a global language, indigenous American words are being spoken all over the world. Some also attribute cultural practices like taking daily baths or caring for the environment to indigenous Americans, for whom respect for land and water is paramount.

In terms of politics, there is evidence that indigenous Americans influenced the very structure of American government. Since the U.S. union of many colonies was arguably modeled after the Iroquois Confederacy. So, there were many political, economic, and cultural ideas that Europeans and Africans gained from their encounter with indigenous Americans. But these exchanges got increasingly complicated.

In 1790, the 1st U.S. Congress passed the Indian Trade and Intercourse Act, regulating trade between colonists and indigenous Americans. This act put all interactions between colonists and indigenous peoples under federal control. This gave indigenous nations some official recognition as sovereign domestic dependent nations. But it changed the dynamics of the trade. It favored colonists, who wanted to use trade to—as they put it—“civilize” indigenous Americans rather than exchange with them on an equal footing. Similarly, Spanish colonial laws in 1791 prohibited contact, communication, and intermarriage between racial groups. As we can see, indigenous Americans played a crucial role in globalization, and they had to cope with the benefits and problems that came with it. But let’s zoom in a bit more, to look at the individual scale. Looking at the lived experiences of indigenous individuals helps us see how they have contributed to, and coped with, globalization.

Paul Cuffee Jr., a sea captain and abolitionist of African and Pequot ancestry, talked about his experiences in his life history. In it, he tells us about how, at the age of 12, he made his first voyage as a hand on board a merchant vessel. Between 1817 and 1821, Paul Cuffee made approximately 20 voyages to the rich whaling waters of the Galapagos Islands, Panama, Peru, Scotland, the West Indies, and the eastern seaboard of the U.S. During these voyages, he amassed a massive fortune of \$96,000—\$9.6 million in today’s money. His success rivaled that of his father Paul Cuffee, Sr.—one of the wealthiest people of color in the Americas at the time. These whaling endeavors also introduced him to an international trade market, which he expertly navigated thanks to his seafaring knowledge. He was able to sell his goods and profited greatly. Paul Cuffee Sr. and Jr. both drew on their cultural heritage to become master seafarers and businessmen in an increasingly global world. For the Cuffees, a global economy provided opportunities that might not have existed otherwise. But the impact of globalization wasn’t and isn’t positive for everyone.

07:40

Text: “Addressing Misconceptions: ‘Globalization is always beneficial’.”

So now let’s take a look at another misconception sometimes surrounding globalization: that it is always beneficial. This certainly hasn’t always been the case for indigenous Americans. Globalization definitely creates new opportunities—like the markets the Cuffees’ were able to explore. But it also completely changes the game—for better or for worse.

08:10

Image of an animated world map showing a worldwide web of connections

Globalization has always broken down barriers between regions and created international networks. But in the last half century, new economic forces have intensified this trend—sometimes to the detriment of indigenous peoples. Some of these economic forces are neoliberal, which means that they promote the economic over the political; free trade; little government intervention in markets; fewer regulations, including labor and environmental protections; no barrier to the flow of goods; and state enforcement of property rights and contracts. These economic forces contribute to globalization. They open up the world to trade and push back against political barriers to industry. But the force of globalization can sometimes collide with local self-determination.

09:07

*Photo of LaDonna Brave Bull holding a microphone; photo of the Dakota Access Pipeline
Black and white photo of Sioux hunters on horseback*

In 2016, Standing Rock Sioux historian LaDonna Brave Bull created a cultural preservation and spiritual resistance camp against the Dakota Access Pipeline, an oil pipeline more than a thousand miles long, cutting through Sioux territory. Her goal was to remind Americans of the importance of respect for the land and water, indigenous American land rights, and the environmental consequences of oil drilling. This pipeline—which is important to powerful multinational companies—created major problems for this local community. Aside from its importance as a farming and hunting area for the Sioux, the land also matters because it’s the site of ancient burial grounds and the source of clean water from the Missouri River. To protect this land against the pipeline, the Sioux sued in court, citing environmental protections and land rights, but they lost.

10:09

This situation exemplifies the clash between the global and the local. The local is the indigenous Sioux nation. The global is in the form of multinational companies, who have an interest in building their \$3.7 billion pipeline. They are both operating in a world governed by neoliberal economic forces, which puts industry first and pushes back against any barrier to growing that industry. Sadly, those barriers have often included indigenous claims over land as well as environmental protections.

10:49

Photo of a banner covered in painted handprints, in support of the Sioux’ land claim. The banner hangs at a protest camp.

But the Sioux persisted and the Dakota Access Pipeline protest brought in thousands of supporters from all over the world. This local indigenous claim turned into a global conversation. Protesters stayed in camps for months. People protested in their home towns as well, and international supporters tagged their social media posts with #NoDAPL—hashtag No-D-A-P-L—to signal their solidarity.

11:21

Ultimately, the U.S. government sided with the builders of the pipeline and forcibly removed the protestors, using attack dogs and water cannons to clear out encampments. Workers bulldozed sacred sites in the path of the pipeline, a tragic moment for the Sioux.

For LaDonna Brave Bull and supporters, the flow of oil to global markets that began on May 14, 2017, serves as a grim reminder of what can happen when indigenous self-determination clashes with global economic interests. But it's certainly not the only relationship, between globalization and indigeneity, as we've seen from this brief survey of regional, individual, and global interactions. Indigenous Americans were not "primitive" when they first encountered European travelers. Nor were they passive in the global exchanges that followed. Rather, the diverse cultures, societies, and politics of indigenous Americans have influenced people all over the world.