



HAL
open science

Compte-rendu: Brian Joseph Gilley. A Longhouse Fragmented, Ohio Iroquois Autonomy in the Nineteenth Century.

Emmanuelle Perez Tisserant

► To cite this version:

Emmanuelle Perez Tisserant. Compte-rendu: Brian Joseph Gilley. A Longhouse Fragmented, Ohio Iroquois Autonomy in the Nineteenth Century.. Itinerario, 2016, pp.347-349. 10.1017/S0165115316000565. halshs-01888770

HAL Id: halshs-01888770

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01888770>

Submitted on 15 Oct 2018

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Review by Emmanuelle Perez Tisserant for the journal *Itinerario*

Brian Joseph Gilley. *A Longhouse Fragmented: Ohio Iroquois Autonomy in the Nineteenth Century*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2014. xiv + 141 pp., 2 maps, 2 paintings. ISBN: 9781438449395 (hbk.). 23,95 \$

This short book by Brian J. Gilley deals with a group of Native Americans of Ohio, the Sandusky Senecas, around the time of their removal to Indian Territory in 1831. This group, the author argues strongly, is part of the Iroquois culture, something that according to him has been denied to them by ethnohistory until now. There is a stake in this proposition because the Iroquois are an emblematic native group in the Eastern United States: the “Six Nations” being sometimes described as an influence on the federal institutions of the United States.¹ As the title and cover suggest, the author's main argument is the continuing importance of the Longhouse, as a building and an institution, among the Sandusky Senecas, a signature feature of Iroquois culture. The case of this people also offers an opportunity to study the continuities and adaptation of a community through time and space, against the pressures of colonizers and the challenge of distance. Gilley wants to evidence the values and practices that held together the group of people under his focus, even while they were experiencing historical change.

As Gilley underlines in his introduction, his study is made difficult both by sources and migration. He had to rely on partial settlers' accounts and he admits that the inconsistency of documentation took him « ever closer to the fringes of historical methodology » (10). That's why he used the methods of up- and downstreaming, developed by anthropologists and ethnohistorians. The upstreaming method uses ethnological observations made today or in the recent past to understand native societies in history. The emphasis on continuity and the search for a mythical authenticity leaves out other aspects of their experience. As a result, other historians as Richard White of Middle Ground fame² have preferred to put the focus on the production of new meanings and new practices. Gilley is disturbed by the fragmentation and disconnection involved by this focus. He claims the use

1 Bruce E. Johansen, *Forgotten Founders: Benjamin Franklin, the Iroquois, and the Rationale for the American Revolution* (Ipswich, Mass.: Gambit, 1982).

2 Richard T. White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

of both upstreaming and downstreaming, not as a way to discriminate between what is authentic and what is not but in order to recognize both “the durability and mobility of [Iroquois] values and sociopolitical practices” (12). Downstreaming is an analysis of the past of native societies looking at what they became today.

The first chapter is like a second introduction. Gilley calls his enterprise a “decolonization of the fragments” (27) described in previous works. It does not mean however, that Gilley fundamentally disagrees with Richard White, for example. But the scale of his study, the community level, allows him, he claims, to be able to see this group of people as something different from “fragments” or “refugees” as other have. According to him, “to name the Seneca...as fragment does not recognize the ways in which [they] were continuing in fact to conduct themselves in very Iroquois ways” (28).

Chapter 2 documents life at the Sandusky reservation, focusing on the Longhouse councils and giving a detailed account of a ceremonial called Midwinter. The Longhouse was physically and symbolically the center of the community for all groups of Iroquois. It was a place of political and diplomatic gatherings. The Sandusky Seneca practised a ceremonial that resembled closely what Six Nations Iroquois called Midwinter, but which local name was not documented. For the author, it is an evidence of the Sandusky Senecas' commitment to “cultural conservatism”, given the necessary solidarity and commitment to perform it. “Hosting...such a ceremony is no small act” he states, “and it thus tells us about the social units and practices held important among the community” (41). During the ceremony, people danced together and shared meals; they also interpreted each others' dreams.

Chapter 3 deals with the issue of the negotiation between the settler state and the Sandusky Senecas form of government. The author convincingly argues that our evaluation of native politics is biased by our expectations (and the Indian agents') of a “state-like government”: the Sandusky people, lacking it in our perspective, are then perceived as “fragmented and disorganized” (54). In fact, by focusing on the scale of a community, their organization, autonomy and continuity appear

more clearly. The description of the rules presiding over Indian councils allows the author to show that, contrary to colonial conceptions, they were organized although their deliberations on topics as grave as land cession and removal lasted too long for the settlers. As Gilley aptly formulates it, “the patient approach of the Sandusky...was not inactive” (64). Also, if there is no doubt about the paternalism of Indian agents, the use of terms like “Great Father” for the U.S. president also reflects the practice of a kinship based political system.

In chapter 4, focusing on removal, the author wants to avoid a narrative of victimization. For Gilley, it is essential to recognize that the Sandusky people “decided when to sign the removal treaty” (74). He describes the negotiation leading to it and details the trip, underlining the autonomy of the Senecas. It is interesting that Gilley always use this term of autonomy and never refers to another concept widely used in history, agency.

Chapter 5 deals with the period after removal and the issue of settlement to a “civilized life”. For the author, the “indolence” described by Indian agents is both a “strategy” from the Sandusky Senecas, and perhaps even more to the point, evidence of the incompatibility of their values and community living with the will of the administration to transform them into settlers. Still, the author shows that the Senecas were facing many challenges to their autonomy, that are well known: pressure to school their children, alcohol, etc. In order to argue for continuity, the author shows how councils kept their central role in Indian territory, in their dealings with other Indian groups and the Confederacy during the Civil War.

In his concluding paragraphs, Gilley invites us again to reflect on how images of discontinuity and fragmentation are produced by the documentation. We should not focus on the relationship between authenticity and geographic space, he states, but instead try to connect movement and sociocultural change to the history of a people and its drive towards keeping sociocultural traditions, what he calls “cultural conservatism” (111).

The text is not always easy to read, especially the preface and introduction. The author sometimes uses jargon that seems not always justified. His use of the expression “Manifest

Destiny” (e.g. 55) lacks precision, since it refers to the settlers' progress in general while the expression was coined only in the 1840s, in a specific geopolitical setting (in particular the rising tensions with Mexico over Texas). Even though the book is short, there are some repetitions. Overall, it is an interesting proposition to study a native society at the community level and on its own terms.