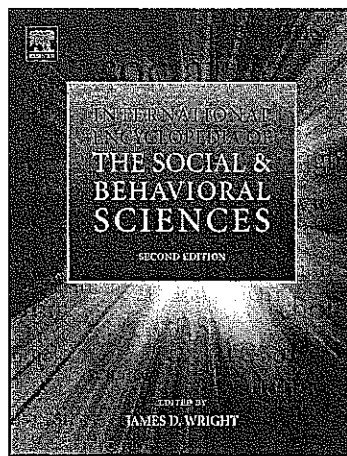


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North America: Sociocultural Aspects

Jessica Cattelino, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

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Abstract

The United States and Canada have long been understood through analysis of the sociocultural aspects of both everyday life and structural forces. Historical transformations in North America have spurred the development of social scientific theory about cultural difference, its sources, and its implications. Several ways of accounting for sociocultural life in the United States and Canada have been salient: as nations of local communities, racially organized societies, nations of immigrants, capitalist economies, contradictory democracies, and, increasingly, as settler colonial societies.

Research on the sociocultural aspects of North America (here focused on the United States and, secondarily, Canada; Mexico is discussed in a separate article) has produced a wide-ranging ethnographic record that centers on a core question: What kinds of societies and polities are the United States and Canada, and to what extent does the answer lie with cultural difference? Answers have transformed along with historical conditions that include post-Cold War global political reorganization, changing structures of economic life and resulting shifts in immigration and gender patterns, welfare state shrinkage, and the persistent inequalities and diverse lived experiences along lines that include race and gender. Many of anthropology's core theoretical and empirical concerns have been developed through the ethnography and ethnology of American lands, peoples, and polities. Anthropologists and other social scientists usefully have analyzed American societies and polities as: collections of local communities; a racialized former slave state; nations of immigrants; capitalist dreams or nightmares; and contradictory democracies. By the late 1900s, they demonstrated that sociocultural life in the United States is organized by kinship, gender, and sexuality. Increasingly in the early 2000s, scholars analyzed the connections among indigenous and nonindigenous North Americans by pointing out the ways that Canada and the United States operate as settler colonial societies.

Theorizing Human Difference from North America

North American cultural lives and social organizations have inspired prominent theories of human difference in anthropology. This is in part because of the region's evident diversity and, relatedly, an outcome of its colonial projects. Three examples illustrate the importance of sociocultural conditions in North America to the development of anthropological theory and, more broadly, of concepts that inform public understandings of human difference. First, during the mid-1800s, at a time when the United States and Canada were consolidating nationhood and progress narratives, the influential early anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan studied Haudenosaunee society and therefrom developed an influential general theory of the stages of social development. His theory informed Engels and Marx and contributed to the rise of social

evolutionism. Second, in the early twentieth century, as scientific racism consolidated and immigration boomed, Franz Boas built from American research (with indigenous peoples and immigrants, in particular) to develop his discipline-defining theory of culture as a nonreductionist explanation for human difference. Third, in the mid-1900s, as Cold War in America debated the role of material conditions in shaping culture, Julian Steward built his theory of cultural ecology from research on the relationship between environment and sociocultural life among indigenous peoples in the Great Basin. Although the paradigmatic object of anthropological analysis has been a distant cultural other, anthropologies of – not simply in – North America long have structured the discipline's core theories.

As is often observed, much of the anthropology of North America that focuses on indigenous peoples has been undertaken in a salvage mode (i.e., as if indigenous peoples as such were about to disappear), with Native American and Aboriginal peoples understood to be culture bearers appropriate for anthropological study. Research has gone hand-in-hand with colonialism, within North America and abroad. Meanwhile, as Lee Baker (2010) argues, anthropologists often viewed other North American groups and formations – he draws a contrast with African-Americans – less as cultural groups and, therefore, as less appropriate for anthropological study. The settler colonial structure of American life, as discussed below, organizes knowledge. That said, there is an old and deep anthropological literature about non-Native communities: in fact, US-based anthropologists study the United States more than any other region.

Communities of Difference

Many Americans understand the United States to be a nation that is comprised of local 'communities.' An emphasis on community has facilitated ethnographic methods of close engagement with the everyday lives of Americans, and it has afforded insights into lived diversity. Critical community studies have reckoned with the powerful American ideology of community that merges communitarian with localist/federalist traditions. Especially in the mid-1900s, ethnographers studied communities that they took to represent a fundamentally

American way of life. Lynd and Lynd's 1929 study of 'Middle-town' and Warner's of 1930s 'Yankee City' (condensed in Warner, 1963), for example, showed how people refracted paradigmatically American values of individualism and hard work through community dynamics that often produced social difference and stratification. Community studies of American culture, as such, most often have been situated in white neighborhoods and towns: whiteness is the unmarked racial category in North America. Similarly, as Di Leonardo (1998) argued, anthropological studies that attempt to show 'America' to be just as exotic as any other society have taken middle-class, white-majority communities as their starting point.

Community studies of poor neighborhoods revealed how inequality permeates everything from the experience of unemployment and youth in Boston (Whyte, 1943) to the everyday rhythms of drug use and commerce in New York City (Bourgois, 1995). 'Culture of poverty' theories, which asserted that cultural dynamics produced dysfunctional family forms and hindered individual and group mobility, gained policy traction amidst 1960s civil rights struggles. The most famous example was the then-Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report on 'The Negro Family: The Case For National Action,' which identified African-American family structure and gender as legacies of slavery and Jim Crow segregation that contributed to dysfunctional 'ghetto' life. An ethnographic rejoinder, Stack's 1974 study of kinship and friendship recast poor African-Americans' social organization as robust in the face of structural inequality. Late-twentieth-century policy debates and scholarship often deployed the term 'culture' as a power-evasive euphemism for race. This uptake of the quintessentially anthropological term *culture* contravened the Boasian legacy of dissociating the two concepts (see below).

Community is not self-evident in North American social life: instead, the very idea of community has afforded Americans a resource for organizing belonging, difference, and politics. As Gregory (1998: 11) showed in his study of political culture and activism in an African-American neighborhood of New York City, "community describes not a static, place-based social collective but the power-laden field of social relations whose meanings, structures, and frontiers are continually produced, contested, and reworked in relation to a complex range of sociopolitical attachments and antagonisms." Similar approaches have reinvigorated regional analysis. In her study of the poetics of place and region in Appalachia, which often symbolizes rural poverty in scholarship and public culture, Stewart (1996) interrogates space and its narration as process and possibility. Weston's 1991 ethnography showed how gay and lesbian family transformed American kinship and its theorization by highlighting how kinship is built from community, as it is variously understood and produced. Community studies have both contributed to and disrupted common understandings of the United States as a tapestry of localized sociocultural groups.

Racially Stratified Societies, a Former Slave State

North America is fundamentally shaped by the sociocultural parameters, experiences, and consequences of race. In the

United States, the nation-shaping institution of slavery and the ongoing inequality of African-Americans call into question dominant American narratives of freedom and equality, and the distinctive forms of racialization experienced by this and other groups illuminates the complexity and salience of race in everyday life. Anthropology established – through efforts to map sociocultural difference onto racialized biological difference – and then struggled to dismantle Social Darwinist understandings of race. The influential anthropologist Franz Boas's early 1900s theories of race informed both American public culture and also the most important US civil rights judicial opinions and legislation of the twentieth century. Boas's research on the cranial size of racialized second-generation Americans showed that the physical differences that scientists often had attributed race (and then used to explain differences in culture and intelligence) were mutable.

Baker (2010) contends that twentieth-century scholars generally associated questions of race with African-Americans and those of culture with, especially, Native Americans. This, in turn, contributed to a broader devaluation of African-American cultural distinctiveness, despite Hurston's (1990(1935)) and others' portrayal of the complexity of African-American cultural life. Increasingly, as the disciplines of sociology and anthropology separated in the mid-1900s, sociologists addressed African-American life while anthropologists dominated the study of Native American life: the latter rarely was theorized in terms of political status or race, but instead as cultural. This cultural framing of Native America remains the case even though Blu (2001(1980)), among others, has shown how blood and race structure indigeneity as a political category in the United States. Other contrasts warrant remark. For example, Drake and Cayton's Works Progress Administration-organized 1945 landmark study of Chicago's 'black metropolis' emphasized that African-American neighborhoods, by contrast with models of urban immigrant ethnic succession, sustained community structures that had been developed in the face of ongoing barriers to economic and geographical mobility. With the rise of Ethnic Studies and post-Civil Rights debates about race, and as demographers predict that by the mid-2000s whites will comprise a minority of the population of the United States and that 'visible minorities' will comprise one-third of the population of Canada, Frankenberg (1993) and others examined the sociocultural contours of whiteness, including at its intersection with gender.

The sociocultural aspects of race in America are lived at the level of everyday experience. From conspiracy theories to DNA ancestry testing to hip-hop, Jackson (2005) shows how turn of the century African-Americans and their interlocutors mobilized race toward intersubjective evaluation and interconnection. As Greenhouse (2011) argued, many community studies in the late twentieth century debunked racial stereotypes but eschewed direct engagement with related policy debates (e.g., 1990s racially punitive federal welfare reform policies that dismantled public benefits and exemplified welfare state retrenchment). Overall, despite trenchant research, and even as anthropologists teach in classrooms that race is a social construction rather than a biological trait, anthropological research on race in North America has lagged by comparison to insights from sociology, history, and interdisciplinary ethnic and American studies.

Nations of Immigrants

That the United States and Canada are 'nations of immigrants' has been variously presumed and investigated. Following the (anthropologically engaged) early twentieth-century Chicago School of Sociology's ethnographic examination of 'ethnic succession' and acculturation in urban neighborhoods, anthropologists have attended to the ways that immigrants are slotted into American structures of difference and inequality. By the late twentieth century, research findings and debates over multiculturalism, along with the ongoing conversation about Quebec's status in Canada, challenged the assumption that becoming American meant the gradual adoption of (implicitly white Anglo) dominant American sociocultural forms of life. Instead of experiencing a universal path, immigrants differentially become racialized into unequal forms of citizenship. For example, Ong's complementary books on the 'flexible citizenship' of East Asian transnational elites in Canada and the United States (1999), on the one hand, and the stigmatized citizenship of low-income Cambodian refugees in California (2003), on the other hand, showed that becoming American in the late twentieth century came with distinct trajectories for different groups.

Research through the twentieth century, therefore, shifted from proving immigrants' equality by showing their capacity for assimilation to charting the ways that immigration structures subjectivity and inequality. Migration is a cultural process that often includes the everyday experience of (il)legality and deportability, as Coutin (2000) showed for Salvadoran migrants to California and De Genova (2005) for 'Mexican Chicago.' These and other ethnographies of the growing Latin American migration to the United States adopted a transnational perspective and thereby challenged the older assumption that migration was a one-way cultural journey. American cultural life changes and becomes all the more globally connected as a consequence of migration. Kinship, gender, and sexuality shape these patterns and experiences, as Manalansan (2003) demonstrated for Filipino gay men. If the United States and Canada are (in part) nations of immigrants, these are stratified and unruly migrations that continually prompt national debates about the meaning and qualities of citizenship.

Capitalist Economies

In scholarship and public debate, the United States has been viewed as an exemplar of capitalism, for better or worse, and both the United States and Canada are characterized by the contradictions of capitalism and inequality. From Goldschmidt's (1947) criticism of corporate agriculture's erosion of community to Nash's (1993) examination of the relationship between community and capitalist industry to Sacks's (1988) ethnography of health care worker rights struggles, research has shown economic organization – and, more specifically, the logics of capitalism – to permeate American social and cultural life. Studies of work by Chicana (Zavella, 1987) and immigrant women (Lamphere, 1987), among others, have revealed how gendered family forms and racial/ethnic subordination are produced and

reinforced by market structures. These market structures are shaped by political processes, as poverty is produced and lived through neoliberal policy and economic restructuring (see, e.g., the approach to poverty studies in Goode and Maskovsky, 2001).

Capitalism affects sociocultural life through the direct effects of day-to-day work, the economic organization of communities, and the everyday experience of economic inequality, opportunity, and community in a class-structured society. Ortner (2003), for example, showed how class shaped the life course of her high school classmates from New Jersey. Chin's (2001) ethnography of how African-American children purchase and use dolls and other objects demonstrates that consumption structures not only class but also race and other social formations. Capitalism also structures American sociocultural transformation, the mundane desires and inter-actions of American people, and the circulation of cultural forms such as film and music (see, e.g., Ortner, 2013, on independent films).

Anthropological methods and ethics long have privileged research in which the scholar develops sympathy with – and sometimes advocacy for – research participants. Acknowledging that such an approach systematically produces research on power's effects rather than on its production, ethnographers have studied economic elites, power brokers, and others at the center of power. For example, ethnography of Wall Street (Ho, 2009) reveals the institutional practices by which inequality is perpetuated at local and global scales. 'The market,' such research shows, is neither an abstract force nor an acultural collection of individual and institutional actors: rather, markets are sites wherein people learn and propagate values through observable sociocultural processes.

Increasingly, American economic life and its sociocultural dimensions are studied as transnational processes: for example, the authors in Maskovsky and Susser (2009) view domestic policy as the home front of American empire, with empire always comingling political and economic projects. That is, global capitalism is not simply an extension of American power and values into far-flung corners of the globe. Instead, it is a force that is produced, extended, and transformed in part through transnational sociocultural processes that also transform life in North America.

Contradictory Democracies

US- and Canadian-style democracies are forms of political organization that emerge from – and, in turn, shape – social and cultural formations. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote about the ways that 1830s Americans' everyday values dovetailed with their democratic order, Jackson Turner advanced his 1893 'frontier thesis' that associated masculinist American spirit with colonial expansion, and American political discourse long has associated democracy with individual and group characteristics. Masco (2006) views the US as a Cold War state (exemplified by Los Alamos), with Cold War logics shot through science, human and nonhuman life forms, and Americans' psychological dispositions. The idea that the United States is 'exceptional' – as a nation founded in democracy and committed to the nonimperial spread of liberty – has been

roundly criticized by critics of American imperialism and settler colonialism.

As they do elsewhere, legal anthropologists of North America deploy the methods of ethnography and sociolinguistics to understand how legal processes take hold in everyday life. They show how court claimants understand justice, immigrants tackle the bureaucratic hurdles of authorization, or courtroom actors encode cultural values in speech and evidentiary standards. Law and policy changes at federal and state levels can have profound impacts on American lives, effects that too often go unseen in the social sciences. Ethnographic investigation of the consequences of 1990s welfare reform laws that transformed the role of work in access to state benefits, for example, called attention to the struggles of Americans to undertake social reproduction in a new policy context. In Canada, as Mackey (1999) has shown, state multiculturalist policy buttresses Canadian narratives of being a tolerant democracy while simultaneously ossifying the cultural criteria by which claims for tolerance can be made. Anthropologists have played a role in implementing federal policy, including as researchers and administrators at World War II-era Japanese internment camps.

Cultural commitments congeal and transform through social movements and the politics of knowledge. For example, Ginsburg (1989) deployed ethnographic methods to show how the two sides of an abortion debate in North Dakota drew different conclusions from their shared view that women are harmed by the systematic separation of wage labor from domestic life and reproduction. Rapp (1999) vividly presented the ethics and sociocultural impact of amniocentesis and thereby highlighted the everyday politics of knowledge production and dissemination.

Anthropologists have asked how the paradigmatic disciplinary concept of 'culture' itself becomes (or always already is) political in North America. Handler's study of cultural patrimony in Québec shows nationalism to be forged through the claim to 'having a culture.' More generally, cultural claims to political belonging are unevenly distributed across race, class, gender, and other forms of difference. Rosaldo (1997) and other theorists of 'cultural citizenship,' for example, observe that people of color build civic claims and experiences from positions of racialized and cultural difference. As with immigration (discussed above) and the contradictions of democratic life more generally, anthropologists have shown citizenship in the United States and Canada to be as much about everyday belonging and exclusion as about formal legal status.

Settler Colonial Societies

In this volume, as in many, research about the United States is categorized as largely distinct from that about American Indian nations. This does not generally result from a stated commitment to underlining indigenous sovereignty and the political distinctiveness of Native nations. To the contrary, Native peoples in the United States long have been studied in anthropology, but review articles and course offerings within the discipline more often than not treat Native America as a distinct 'culture area.' This scholarly tradition reproduces a broader US public culture in which indigenous peoples more

commonly are associated with past tradition (or present-day socioeconomic failure and cultural decline) than with a vibrant and contradictory American present or future. In Canada, indigeneity joins Québec's status as a prominent topic in political theory, not only in anthropology. First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples more frequently are understood in scholarship and public culture to form a constitutive part of the Canadian political order, albeit not necessarily on the terms or with the projected future that Aboriginal peoples choose.

The United States and Canada are settler societies with ongoing settler colonial relations among indigenous and nonindigenous peoples. Settler colonialism describes myriad sociocultural and political-economic formations that typify liberal democratic white-majority societies with dispossessed indigenous minorities. These include legal systems that recognize multiple sovereigns, struggles over how to encode differentiated forms of citizenship alongside a liberal democratic commitment to equal citizenship, the appropriation of indigenous culture for settler-state national patrimony and identity, a public culture and scholarly tradition that relegates indigenous authenticity and power to the past, and the association of indigenous peoples with poverty and precapitalism as against settler modernity. Wolfe (1999) shows how anthropological research contributed to settler colonialism's eliminatory logics. Classic settler colonial societies stemming from the British common law tradition are the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand; not coincidentally, those were the four major states that voted against (and subsequently became the last to support) the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Settler colonialism creates a set of structures, practices, ideological formations, and dilemmas that are open to social scientific analysis. Relative to analysts in other disciplines, for example, anthropologists are likely to study indigenous sovereignty's local manifestations in everyday life. Cattelino's (2008) study of tribal gaming showed Florida Seminole sovereignty to be enacted through the coproduction of economic power with cultural and political distinctiveness. Relative to other anthropologists of sovereignty who more commonly focus on the sovereign's power to harm, those who study indigenous sovereignties call attention to sovereignty's political capaciousness (see, e.g., Sturm, 2002, on Cherokee blood and citizenship politics and Kauanui, 2008, on Hawaiian genealogy and political belonging). Such a focus on indigenous sovereignties, in turn, illuminates settler-state sovereignty. For example, Simpson (2014) examines Mohawk narratives of, and embodied practices at, the US-Canadian border to show how indigenous nationalism unsettles settler-state sovereignty.

Settler colonialism, and particularly the related presumption that indigenous peoples are disappearing, has shaped research on the sociocultural characteristics of the United States and Canada. The specter of indigenous disappearance that built four-field American-style anthropology in the nineteenth century formed part of broader US debates about modernity, American exceptionalism, and democracy. Documentation of indigenous culture at the turn of the twentieth century, often funded by national institutions such as the federal Bureau of American Ethnology, went hand-in-hand with the establishment of national(ist) patrimony in a still-young settler nation

that remained unsure of its pedigree. Late-twentieth-century ethical and methodological debates over disciplinary anthropology's relationship with Native America went to the heart of how knowledge production has been complicit in the dispossession of indigenous political and economic power. Cruikshank's (2005) ethnography of glaciers and colonial encounters at the border of British Columbia, the Yukon Territory, and Alaska told how social and biophysical processes combine to produce knowledge. When research with (or often on) indigenous peoples is understood to be about the settler nation more generally, it becomes clearer that anthropological research in and about the United States and Canada, as settler nations, is nothing new.

To describe the United States and Canada as settler societies foregrounds indigeneity as a constitutively dispossessed condition of American life for all of the continent's residents. Indeed, emergent inquiry into settler colonialism and the politics of indigeneity has the potential to account for the ways that being a settler society structures all American lives. Doing so does not obviate the value of describing North America in other ways – through the study of community, race, immigration, capitalism, democracy, and more – but, rather, joins with these in the effort to capture both the structural forces and lived experiences of these diverse lands and peoples.

See also: Americas, Sociocultural Overviews: North America, Native Americans; Anthropology at Home; Borders, Anthropology of; Colonialism, Anthropology of; Family: The Anthropology of the Concept and Its History; Functionalism in Anthropology; Globalization, Anthropology of; Indigeneity; Industrial Societies; Liberalism: Political Doctrine and Impact on Social Science; Modernity: Anthropological Aspects; Nationalism: General; Poverty, Culture of; Urban Anthropology.

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