

The First Americans
Professor Maria A. Brown

In this session we briefly consider various recurring themes in the American experience that we discuss during the term. We will then begin our discussion on the origins of American civilization and History, the First Americans and the consequences of the coming of Europe to the New World.

“Because Indian writing was either undeveloped or limited to glyphs yet to be fully deciphered,” it has been concluded that American history begins with that traumatic period when Europe discovered the Americas and began to conquer, colonize, exploit, Christianize and enslave the indigenous population—a population who had long before the arrival of the Europeans had occupied and shaped the lands of the Western Hemisphere. In considering the origins of American civilization and history, we are faced with a number of major themes that we will be exploring during the semester:

1. What is the genesis, the experience and future prospects for America’s class, racial, ethnic, political, and cultural pluralism?
2. What role has technology played in the development of American civilization and what role should it play?
3. Has the fact that American history began as an offshoot of European imperialism affected the American society and culture?
4. What role did religion and idealism play in the story of the conquest of the Western Hemisphere and the rearing of the new civilizations upon it?

5. In contemporary times, how is American civilization and individual American men and women, to restore a balance between technology and nature, a sufficient degree of amicability between people of different racial and religious origins and a proper balance with the supernatural order—not just to survive, but to make life meaningful?

Recent archeological findings suggest that the Americas were not populated by people until 35,000 to 25,000 years ago. Between various glaciation periods, it is believed, different people of Asiatic origin journeyed across what was then a land bridge between Siberia and Alaska and by 8000 B.C. these nomadic people had spread throughout the Western Hemisphere. In coming to the New World they brought with them many basic human skills--skills that would become essential for their survival in this strange land--skills such as fire making, flint napping and ways to feed, shelter and cloth themselves. As early immigrants to New World, they lived in close-knit clans, socially interacted and shared beliefs about the natural and supernatural.

Arriving in migratory waves, over the course of thousands of years, the first immigrant to the Western hemisphere, settled the Americas and adapted to the ever changing climatic conditions and resources. The immigrants were primarily hunter and seed gather nomads. Their survival was dependent on a food supply over which they had very little control – they were, more often than not, at the mercy of their environment.

As the environment changed so too did the evolving Indian communities. In areas where big game and plants declined because of lack of water, the Indian

communities in those areas either had to move on to find new sources of food or adapt their culture to the new environmental conditions. In a process of constant environmental and cultural change the Indian focused on agriculture – domesticating plant life.

As the Indian learned to domesticate plant life, they embarked upon a long arduous process that transformed their communities and ultimately made it possible for them to, in a sense, liberate themselves from the oppression of their psychical world. According to Dr. Gary Nash in his work *Red, White, and Black...* “To learn to harvest, plant and nurture a seed was to assume some of nature’s function and to gain control over what had been uncontrollable.” (Nash, p. 10)

The agricultural revolution brought dramatic changes to the immigrants to the New World, just as it had and would in Southwestern Asia, Africa and Europe. (Nash, p. 10) The domestication of plant life helped to accelerate permanent settlement or the sedentary way of life. It stimulated population growth and created a division of labor between the sexes. As more ample food fueled population growth, large groups split off to form separate societies. Greater social and political complexity developed because not everyone, like before, was needed to secure the society’s food supply. While men cleared the land and engaged in hunting for game, women planted, cultivated and harvested the crop. Everywhere in the Americas, regional trading networks were created. By the end of 500 B.C. hundreds of independent Indian clans had learned to exploit the resources of their environment and trade with other clans in their regions. Now, more time and energy could now be spent on the development of religious, economic, social, and political institutions as well technologies that facilitated the Indian

ways of life and evolution of their societies.

Depending on their environment, some of those societies were rooted in agriculture, others in trade or imperial conquest. The point is, the New World people, over the course of thousands of years, developed sophisticated art forms, elaborate political and social institutions, intricate intellectual patterns, mathematics, handicrafts, agriculture, writing, complex religious and belief systems. All of this made it possible for them to built stable, diverse cultures and often highly sophisticated societies ranging from the massive totalitarian civilization of the Incas in Peru to the hunter-gathering Eskimo-Aleuts of Alaska. They may even have developed as many as 2000 different languages. By the time Columbus began his western odyssey there were millions of native people living in the Western Hemisphere.

In North America, from the pre-Columbian period until the post-Columbian era, there were approximately six major Indian cultural areas, excluding that of the Arctic. These areas included the Northwest Coast, Plains, Plateau, Eastern Woodlands, Northern and the Southwest.

The Northwest Coast area extended along the Pacific coast from Southern Alaska to Northern California. This thickly wooded area, with a temperate climate and heavy rainfall, supported the large Tsimshian and Nootka population. Salmon was a diet staple, supplemented by sea lions, seals, deer, elk and bears as well as berries and other wild fruit. The people of this area used wood to build their houses and had cedarplanked canoes and carved dugouts. In their permanent winter villages there were totem poles, which were elaborately carved and decorated with animal symbols. Their art work included the making of ceremonial items, such as rattles and masks,

weaving and basketry. They lived in a stratified society with chiefs, nobles, commoners and slaves. Wealth was a basic feature of these societies and was displayed in woven robes, furs and basket hats as well as wooden armor and helmets for battle. This culture which included cannibalistic rituals, was not greatly effected by European influences until the late 18th century when white fur traders and hunters came to the area.

The Plains area extended from just North of the Canadian border and South of Texas and included the grasslands between the Mississippi River and the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The groups in this region included the Arapahos, Cheyenne, Shoshonis, Kiowas, Sioux, and the Pawnees. In the pre-Columbian period there were two types of Indians in this area, the sedentary farmer and the pedestrian nomad. The sedentary tribes, who migrated from neighboring regions and had initially settled along the river valleys, were farmers and lived in villages of dome-shaped earth lodges surrounded by earthen walls. They grew corn, squash and beans. In the tradition of the ancient Plains nations, pedestrian nomads, by contrast moved about with goods on dog-drawn travois and eked out a merger existence by hunting the vast herds of buffalo (bison). Their diet was supplemented by exchanging meat and hides for the corn of the Indian farmers. Although there has been considerable discussion on exactly when the horse was introduced to the Plains Indian, that a horse culture had evolved in the region sometime, the during 17th century. Horses transformed the Plains and created the youngest and perhaps the most familiar of North American Indian cultures. Iron Teeth, a Cheyenne woman of the central plains tells us:

“My Grandmother told that when she was young. . .

[t]he people themselves had to walk. In those times they did not travel far nor often. But when they got horses, they could move more easily from place to place. Then they could kill more of the buffalo and other animals, and so they got more meat for food and gather more skins for lodges and clothing.” (500 Nations, p.359)

Many Indians left their villages and joined the nomads. Mounted and armed with bow and arrow, they roamed the grasslands hunting buffalo. The nomads developed a universal sign language and often would declare and go to war against other Indians. Living on horse and in the portable tipi, they preserved food by pounding and drying lean meat and made their clothes from buffalo hides and deer skins. The system of coup was a basic feature of their society. Other elements that identified the Plains Indian was fasting in search of a vision, warrior clans, beads and feather artwork and decorated hides. The Plains Indians were among the last to engage in a serious struggle with the white settlers in the United States.

The Plateau area extended from above the Canadian border through the plateau and mountain area from the Rocky Mountains to the southwest and included California. The Indian groupings of this area include the Spokane, the Paiute, the Nez Perce and the Shoshone. Because of the inhospitable environment the cultural development in this region was slow. The Indians in the Central Valley of California and on the California coast were sedentary people, who gathered edible plants, roots, fruit and small game. Their acorn bread, made by pounding acorns into meal and leaching it with hot water was distinctive. They cooked in baskets filled with water and heated by hot stones. The bush was used for shelter. They built partly buried earth lodges for ceremonies and ritual sweat baths. Basketry, was highly developed. To the north

between the Cascade Range and Rocky Mountains, the social political, and religious systems were simple, and art was almost nonexistent. The culture of the Plateau region was greatly effect it was introduced to the horse by the Plains Indians. The Plateau Indians adapted to the tepee, a form of the sun dance and deer skin clothing. However they continued to fish with nets and spears and gather camas bulbs. The also gathered ants and other insects and hunted small game and later the buffalo. Their permanent winter villages on waterways in semisubterranean lodges with conical roofs. A few natives lived in bark-covered long houses.

The Eastern Woodlands covered the eastern part of the United States. This area stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi and included the Great Lakes and from what is now northern (up state) New York to Pennsylvania . . The people in this vast region also included the Natchez, the Choctaw, the Cherokee, and the Creek.

It is also in this region that the ancestors of the Iroquois made their place. The Iroquois clans were named after the first ancestors: The Eagle clan, the Heron clan, the Wolf clan and the Beaver clan. They lived along the valleys, mountains and the flatlands of up state New York between 100 A.D. and 1300. They were largely deer hunters and farmers. The women tended small plots of corn, squash and beans. . Their diet of deer meat was supplemented by fish and shell fish. Cooking was done in vessels of wood and bark or black pottery. They lived in dome shaped wigwam and erected long houses longer than a modern football field and covered them with slabs of elm bark .

A typical Iroquois family was grounded in a matrilineal structure. Family membership was determined through the female line. When men married they left

home to live in the longhouse of their wives. Except for their weapons, clothing and personal possessions everything in the Iroquois society including the longhouse belonged to the women. It was the wife's responsibility to see to it that the husband was well dressed and respectable. If a male kinsman was killed in war, the woman was entitled to demand an enemy captive in compensation, who, she was free to torture or kill if she pleased. Divorce was also the woman's prerogative. If a woman wanted to dissolve her marriage, she could simply set her husband's belongings outside their dwelling door. The clan mothers appointed and dismissed all councillor-chiefs.

The role of women in the Iroquois society reinforced the idea of the sharing of power between men and women. As hunter traders and warriors, men traveled extensively. An ambitious military campaign meant the war parties war might be gone for an extended period of time. Although a few younger men were left behind to defend the longhouses, women assumed full responsibility for community life, from nursing to child care, from planting to harvesting and the distribution and storage of that harvest. What they did not prepare for immediate consumption, they stored for the future in underground granaries. These matrilineal clans were to become the building blocks for a brand new political institution..

Around 1460, according to Iroquois tradition, after years of chronic strife and bloody and endless warfare, and long before the arrival of the Europeans, five tribes --- the Mohawks ("People of Flint"), the Oneidas ("People of the Stone"), Onondagas ("People of the Mountain"), Cayugas (People of the Landing"), and the Senecas ("Great Hill People"), aligned themselves into a political confederacy or what Europeans would later call the League of the Iroquois .

In his essay “The Great Law of Peace,” David Yarrow writes:

“To the poor, often starving and indentured refugees from European Feudal society, the vast, unexplored North American continent was the far dark shores of hope, an escape from the continued numbness of poverty, suffering and misery. These new comers saw the New World as a shining symbol of freedom, fortune and the possibility of a happy future. But the New world was not only a symbol. In truth it was the birthplace and homeland of liberty and democracy—for the arts of peace had taken root on Turtle Island many hundreds of years before.”

At the time of the arrival of the Europeans to the New World, it has been argued that the League of the Iroquois was the oldest, most highly evolved participatory democracy on Earth. Its origins being with the story of a people locked in violent bloody feuds who, guided by the holy man, Deganawidah set aside war to adopt a Path of Peace. Again Yarrow writes:

“It’s a mythic tale of the struggle between good and evil, order and chaos and the triumph of Reason. It is a morality play depicting the transformation of humans rising above suffering and tragedy to establish a higher order of human relations. It is also a practical guide to establishing unity and balance amongst diverse human communities. It is a successful model of how to distribute power in a democratic society to assure individual liberty.”

According to the legend, the Great Peacemaker united the Five Nations under the Tree of Peace a symbol of the Great Law of Peace, proclaiming that All nations committed to the idea of peace would find shelter under the branches of the great white pine. And so, “Beneath the tree the Five Nation buried their weapons of war; atop the tree is the Eagle-that-sees-far, and four long roots stretched out in the four sacred directions—the “white roots of peace.” The Peacemaker further proclaimed, “If any man or nation shows a desire to obey the Law of the Great Peace, they may trace the roots to their source, and be welcomed to take shelter beneath the Tree.” And thus

the Confederacy of the Iroquois was born, thus creating the political landscape of North America.

Deeply rooted in the principles of natural law—the highest principles of human liberty” The Great Law of Peace recognized “freedom of speech, freedom of religion and the right of women to participate in government and the decision making process and the practice of separation of power in government and checks and balances within government. These ideals and principles, traceable to the Iroquois constitution became the cornerstones of the American constitution.

The Northern region covered most of semiarctic land from the Rocky Mountains to the Hudson River. The Chipewyan lived in this region. Because the environment did not support farming, the Chipewyan hunted, gathered roots, berries, trapped small game and fished to supplement their diets. Nomadic hunters moved with the season from forest to tundra, kill the caribou in semiannual drives. Not only did the caribou, but also clothing and some shelter and leather thongs the Indians laced their snowshoes as well as nets and bags.

The Southwest region reached over Arizona, New Mexico and part os Colorado and Utah. People found in this region were the future Hopi, the Zuni, Navaho and the Apache. In the region initially, a seminomadic people called the Basket Makers settled the area. They hunted with a spear thrower, developed the art of cultivation and they learned to make unfired pottery. The wove basket, sandals, and bags.. By 700 B.C. they had initiated agriculture, made potter and hunted with bow and arrow. They lived in pit dwellings which partly under ground and lined with slabs of stone—the slab house. A new people came into the area some two centuries later who were the ancestors of

the Pueblo Indians. They lived in large terraced community houses set on ledges of cliffs for protection and developed a ceremonial chamber called the Kiva. By the time the Spaniards arrived in the New World in the 1540s, the Pueblo people were using irrigation canals, dams, and hillside terracing to bring water to their arid maize fields. The life of the Pueblo people, in many respects, resembled the peasant communities in many parts of Europe and Asia.

Although the people of the New World, as we have discussed, were diverse in culture, climatic conditions and customs, they share fundamental concepts. Unlike the Europeans, who they would encounter with tragic consequences, the Indians believed that man and nature were very much on the same footing and they committed most of their religion and life to maintaining a “proper” order with the natural world. This implies, that to the Indian, there was no concept of land as personal property and that the natural world was one with the supernatural.

When the Europeans arrived in the New World in 1492, two totally different but abounding worlds of rich, complex societies and advanced cultures clashed, each with its own distinctive heritage and view of the universe. “The Europeans, as we know, were heirs to the legacies of early Near Eastern cultures and the civilizations of Egypt, Greece, and Rome; to the Judeo–Christian ethical and religious teachings; to the political and intellectual life of the many competing states, nation, and empires of eastern and western Europe; and to the economic institutions of feudalism and expanding capitalism.” The Indians’ spiritual life, customs, values and beliefs were deeply rooted in the evolution of the of the New World environment and their perceived connection with the land.

The Europeans believed in individual ownership of land. Fences symbolized private property, inheritance became the mechanism for that ownership to pass from generation to another within the same family. Property was the basis not only sustenance, but also of independence, material wealth political status and personal identity. The social-economic structure in the European society reflected land ownership with land-wealthy elite at the very top of the social pyramid and a mass of propertyless individuals forming the broad base.

The Indians also had a concept of property and the tribes recognized territorial boundaries. But they believed, as a German missionary put it, that the “Creator made the Earth and all that it contains for the common of mankind. That whatever liveth on the land, whatsoever groweth out of the earth, and all that is in the rivers and waters.. . was given jointly to all and everyone is entitled to his share.” (Nash, *The American People*, p.12) Communal ownership of land vs. individual ownership of land—values and perceptions, that definitely clashed when the Indians and Europeans made contact with each other.

The Indian’s view of the European had no meaning as the Europeans dressed in metal armor and armed with guns, warhorses and attack dogs, steel swords deadly diseases that ultimately wiped out whole Indian tribes.

Eurocentric, i.e., ethnocentric in their view of people, the Spaniards who first come to the New World were thoroughly convinced that their culture, values, religions, life styles, abilities were of a higher order. They saw the Indians as inferior people who

were no more than Stone Age savages and believed that their cultures were irrelevant or barbaric and as dangerous to the civilized world.

This belief in their alleged superiority combined with their military might gave Europeans justification for the invasion, enslavement and seizure of Indian lands and resources and (patronization) a labor system that treated the Indians as inferiors and denied them their humanity and respect for their life.

During the first centuries of contact, native populations were massacred, cities and towns destroyed, chiefdoms and other societies ripped apart. It has been estimated that by the 17th century more than 50 million Indians, in North and South America perished as a result of war, disease, enslavement and the careless or deliberate brutality of the Europeans.

The ethnocentric and racist view of the Spaniard of the Indians in the Caribbean and Southern North America was adapted by other European powers ultimately destroying Indian cultures and the possibility of the Indians establishing harmonious coexistence and mutual respect with them. For example, in 1637, the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay viewed the Pequot Indian as the “children of Satan” and tried them with fire and sword to blot out every sign that the Indian existed. Thus European contact with the New World led to the destruction of the pre-Columbian world--the erasure of historical cultures and achievements of that world from memory.