

INCORPORATING NORTH AMERICA INTO THE EURASIAN WORLD-SYSTEM

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Keywords: American Indians, Native Americans, First Nations, First Peoples, incorporation, Indian country, indigenous peoples, nation, nomadic, slash-and-burn, state, transhumant, tribal zone, effect, tribe, virgin soil epidemic

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Summary

The absorption of the Americas into Eurasian exchange and conflict networks is one of the most significant social events since the neolithic. The impacts were demographic, ecological, social, cultural, and economic. Contact and absorption brought widely diverse peoples into interaction. Diseases severely disrupted many of the widely varied indigenous populations of the Americas. New crops were introduced to the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa. New animals were imported to the Americas. While there were common patterns and processes, each local instance of absorption was in unique in some ways. Balanced accounts are difficult because most indigenous populations left few written records. Still, much recent research has uncovered much new material from the Americas which suggests that first hand accounts must be treated cautiously. Discussion of such political sensitive topics over such a wide area and time-span requires close attention to terminology both with respect to denotative meanings and implicit political baggage. Still, the many reactions, adaptations, and forms of resistance, and accommodations made by Native Peoples, as well as by Eurasian peoples, underscore a great deal of human creativity and adaptability. They also demonstrate tremendous ability to adjust to unforeseen changes.

1. Introduction

Among the First Peoples who inhabit what is now the United States there are many humorous accounts of the first encounters with Europeans. One popular anecdote in

“Indian Country” (a term many Native Peoples use for their collective communities) goes like this: Two “Indians” looking upon the ocean see a few strange vessels, with strange, human-like beings approaching. One Indian turns to the other and says, “Well, there goes the neighborhood!”

Nothing is as unfunny as an explained joke, but this one needs some unpacking. First, as will be discussed in an “excursus on terminology” later, how to refer to the people who were here before Europeans arrived is problematic. So when an indigenous person in the United States uses the term “Indian” in such a joke, it is a somewhat tongue-in-cheek reference to a solidarity group that has its origins in Christopher Columbus’s mistaken idea that in 1492 he had landed on an island off the coast of India. Second, the comment about the neighborhood harks to the movement for desegregation between Black and White communities in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, when a significant portion of the white population was concerned that property values and the quality of life would be harmed by entry of any or too many (how many is too many was never specified) Blacks into “the neighborhood.” Third, there is a bit of an anachronism in the tale, in the assumption that those “Indians” seeing this first arrival already knew that the newcomers intended to “move in,” that is, stay. Fourth, there is the ironic inversion that “the neighborhood” (which is of necessity was then entirely Native) will be harmed by the arrival of whites, who have generally been ranked at the top of the racial and ethnic hierarchy common in the United States. In short, there is a lot of information packed in this brief, humorous story.

The large amount of implicit meaning in the joke notwithstanding, it is an apt epigraph for this chapter. The arrival of Europeans, which marked the beginnings of the inclusion of the Americas in the orbits of Afroeurasian peoples, was both devastating to the local inhabitants and packed with many nuanced layers, meanings, and consequences. And, when unpacked is notably **not** funny. But it is a story that continues to need to be told, explored, elaborated, and often corrected.

The inclusion of the Americas into the economic, political, social, and cultural networks of Afroeurasia led to the largest changes for humans in the Americas, and possibly animals and plants, since humans first arrived there. It also marked the beginning of the largest population decline in human history due to diseases unwittingly brought by Europeans. Yet such a momentous event cannot be precisely dated, nor can anyone name a precise set of actors responsible for the changes. Rather, it was an extended process, still continuing in the twenty-first century. At times these processes occurred with blinding speed, and at other times they proceeded with almost glacial slowness.

While this chapter focuses on European expansion and inclusion of the peoples, flora, fauna, and lands of the Americas into European circuits of exchange, such processes have occurred throughout world history, notably since the invention of states in Mesopotamia some five millennia ago. When states expand, they encounter, displace, destroy, absorb or change societies from the simplest to the most complex. These processes, labeled incorporation, are highly variable and highly complex. In that sense the processes described here are of far broader significance than the occupation of the Americas. They are broadly analogous to processes that have occurred throughout world history, even while each specific instance of incorporation was uniquely shaped by the

constellation of specifically local and supra-local processes. This chapter will revisit this larger importance after presenting an account of the incorporation of the Americas into the European-based world system.

A variety of motivations drove this expansion. These motivations had explicit, implicit, and often contradictory goals within any one originating state, and varied even more among different states, and through time between and across states.

The number of different peoples who already lived in the Americas at the time of first European contact far exceeded the number of states who sought to “include” them, or the variety of motives for doing so. Not surprisingly, then, there was tremendous variation in the responses to these many attempts at “inclusion.” While in the long run the Americas, their peoples, their fauna, and their flora were drawn into Afroeurasian circuits, the process was not linear, nor even steady, but marked by cycles, reversals, resistance, and periods of relative quiescence.

Summarizing what happened is a major undertaking that would require many volumes. Any brief account necessarily leads to broad summary statements that omit many important details. The difficulty, however, goes beyond providing a reasonable summary. Many of the general processes are best, and often only, observed in fine-grained accounts. Furthermore, the predominance of written records and other documentary evidence from the Afroeurasian sides of the processes of contact, conflict, inclusion, or resistance – whether broad brush or fine-grained – makes rendering an even handed account more difficult.

One approach, the one taken here, is to begin with a broad overview of the processes of inclusion or incorporation. The account then turns to regional overviews, spiced with a few detailed examples by way of illustration; then returns to some general issues that should be addressed in any specific, or general, account.

Readers should note that this chapter is only one of many possible points of view on this complex topic. It, alas, is shaped by the author’s own background, a sociologist in the United States who studies processes of incorporation with a special emphasis on indigenous peoples. Hence the chapter overemphasizes North America, and English language sources. The bibliography includes not only the main sources upon which it draws, but a number of items that give broader and other points of view (the latter are noted in the bibliography). The author considers this chapter only one contribution among many to a continuing discussion on the incorporation of the Americas into the world-system. It is a point of departure, not a final word.

Before turning to that overview which will stress human social interactions, it is important to sketch some further background on terminology, problems of reconstructing the history of the encounter, and a few broad, ecological issues. As much research in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has shown, separating humans from their ecological setting is not a fruitful way to understand human societies. The point here is to provide at least a partial context within which to understand the discussion of social processes.

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Biographical Sketch

Thomas D. Hall received the BA degree from the University of California at Berkeley, the MA from University of Michigan, both in Anthropology; the Ph.D. from University of Washington in 1981, sociology. He has been a faculty member at several universities. He became the first Lester M. Jones Professor of Sociology at DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana in 1989, and now holds the Edward Myers Dolan Chair in Anthropology. In 1999 and again in 2004 he held the A. Lindsay O'Connor Professor of American Studies at Colgate University, in Hamilton, NY. In 2004 he was awarded the rank of University Professor at DePauw University. He has published several books and many articles in chapters throughout the social sciences. He has been council member, secretary-treasurer, and chair (2006-07) of the Political Economy of the World-System section of the American Sociological Association. He serves on several editorial boards. His interests include World-Systems Analysis, Historical and Comparative sociology, Social Change, Development, Comparative Frontiers, Race & Ethnic Relations, Stratification, Indigenous Peoples, Native Americans, American Southwest, Southeast Asia.