

INDIAN NATION(S): AMERICAN INDIANS BETWEEN STEREOTYPE AND REALITY

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Abstract:

What are American Indians, and how have they been conceptualized by non-Indian culture? This presentation offers some introductory thoughts especially with relation to the nature/civilization dichotomy.

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1. Identity in a Tribal Context

Is there a specific “American Indian” identity?

1. Identity in a Tribal Context

- Dichotomy:
indigenous nations as tribal,
Western nations as non-tribal
- misconstrual of Western structures, failure to realize the complexity of the internal composition of Western nations, the West seen as monolithic (an own and attributed stereotype) - allowing for tribe/state dichot.

1. Identity in a Tribal Context

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- tribal identity as pre-modern?
- re-establishment of tribal/clan structures in modern surroundings (regionalisms, extended family and friends, work collectives, alumni & other associations, gangs, „networking“)
- alas: „classical“tribal structures v. tribalism

1. Identity in a Tribal Context

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- problems of early anthropology:
Henry Lewis Morgan / Margaret Mead
misconstrual/misleading
(property, meaning of matrilineal structures,
polygamy, pacifism, ecologism)
- difference in structures of small tribes and nation-
like tribal structures or empires

7 2. Nature vs./& Civilization

Investigating the Nature-Civilization dichotomy

2. Nature vs./& Civilization

□ Frederick Jackson Turner

„The Significance of the Frontier in American History“

- “ Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development (Turner 30)
- “ The most significant thing about the American frontier is, that it lies at the hither edge of free land (31)
- “ The wilderness masters the colonist. [...] at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish [...] Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe [...] here is a new product that is American. (32)

2. Nature vs./& Civilization

“ The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and moccasin. ... Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In first, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe. ... The fact is that here is a new product that is American. (32)

2. Nature vs./& Civilization

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First Landing SP,
Virginia

2. Nature vs./& Civilization

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Jamestown NHP,
Virginia

2. Nature vs./& Civilization

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- Dichotomy: Nature / Civilization
- Association Game

2. Nature vs./& Civilization

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Nature

- wilderness
- freedom of choice
- dangerous
- pure
- contagious
- green
- animals
- decaying
- untouched
- empty / of human beings / of civ

Civilization

- war
- machines
- rules
- a pretext
- morality
- property
- hierarchy
- borders
- protection from nature
- overpopulation
- disease
- hypocrisy
- pollution
- medicine, protecting social structures
- religion

2. Nature vs./& Civilization

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- Indians associated with Nature
- Westerners associated with Civilization

- teleological view: per aspera ad astra / „overcoming“ nature / misunderstandings about the human animal (instinctive behavior, naturalness of culture)

2. Nature vs./& Civilization

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- civilization as adaptation
- adaptation dependent upon local circumstances
- Diamond: geographical distribution of resources, utilization of resources

2. Nature vs./& Civilization

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- result: American Indians, be it small tribes or great empires, maximized their degree of utilizing natural resources

2. Nature vs./& Civilization

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- Indian Givers: resources, technology
- Indian Givers: politics

2. Nature vs./& Civilization

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Sequoyah,
Cherokee Museum,
Cherokee IR, NC

2. Nature vs./& Civilization

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Cherokee IR, NC

2. Nature vs./& Civilization

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Cliff Palace,
Mesa Verde NP,
CO

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3. Stereotypes

How have Indians been represented?

3. Stereotypes

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- Noble Savage (Cooper, May, Costner)
- representations of modern indian types in recent media: trickster (Hawkeye Pierce on *M*A*S*H*), scout (Hawk on *Twin Peaks*), sensitive elder (Chakotay on *Voyager*), wisdomkeepers (Navajo elders on *The X-Files*)

3. Stereotypes

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- Where is the true Indian?

3. Stereotypes

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- Ignorant/Techno-mage Westerner

3. Stereotypes

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- stereotypes having a life of their own (memetics)
- stereotypes are for storytelling and simplifying
- positive/negative stereotypes
- what happens if stereotype guides perception more thoroughly and is either confirmed or violated

3. Stereotypes

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- Noble Savage stereotype
- benefits: accumulation of niceties, speaking to desires within Western civilization, speaking to self-image of Indians, perfect memetic fitness for propagation
- fitness of stereotype not necessarily means a beneficial influence on humans

3. Stereotypes

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- Dichotomy: real/imagined (constructed)
- is there a „there“ there?
- basis for constructions
- recognition of constructions / selective utilization & adoption of constructions

3. Stereotypes

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Cherokee Museum,
Cherokee IR, NC

3. Stereotypes

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US Capitol with
Indian-looking
statue of freedom

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- for a selection of pictures from Indian Reservations, visit www.philjohn.com/ndn