Historical Perspectives

The United States, which has been called a "nation of nations," is one of the most ethnically diverse societies in the modern world (Table 1). Despite an ideology—the "American Creed"—formally committed to human equality, racial and ethnic criteria have frequently determined social status in American society, and conflict for economic, social, and political preeminence among its numerous racial and ethnic groups has been one of the most salient features of the American experience. Figure 1 presents data on the distribution of major racial and ethnic groups in the United States. Presently, members of the largest racial and ethnic minorities (African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and American Indians comprise more than one-quarter [28.5 percent] of the population. This section provides a brief overview of the history of American ethnic relations. Because they are so numerous, it would be impossible to examine the experience of all American ethnic groups in this brief section [for a comprehensive survey, see the superb essays in the Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups [Thernstrom 1980] and the Gale Encyclopedia of Multicultural Groups [Galens, et al. 1995]]. The articles included here provide conceptual and substantive continuity to the volume as a whole. This survey of several of the major ethnic and racial categories that collectively comprise the American people—what Hollinger [Article 4] terms the American "ethnoracial pentagon"—is organized in roughly the chronological order of their migration to North America. We begin by sketching some key features of the experience of the earliest inhabitants—American Indians—and conclude with a discussion of some of the most recent immigrants to the United States.

American Indians/Native Americans

The first Americans migrated from Asia between 12,000 to 40,000 years ago, slowly dispersing throughout North, Central, and South America. Although the length of time that they have inhabited the American continents is brief when compared with human societies elsewhere in the world, American Indian peoples developed a great diversity of cultures with widely different levels of technology, cultural complexity, and languages. The large and highly sophisticated Aztec, Inca, and Mayan civilizations contrast
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sharply with the simpler societies of the Yavapai, Onondaga, and Kansa. As Cynthia Enloe has written, even “before the arrival of Europeans the American continent was already ethnically plural” (Enloe 1981:126). Today the U.S. government officially recognizes 554 Indian tribes and Alaska Native groups (U.S. Department of the Interior, 1997).

A bewildering diversity of native peoples was present when Europeans first invaded the Americas. Perhaps the best index of this extraordinary cultural diversity is the myriad number of languages found in the Americas; as Ruhlen (1987) has pointed out, the Americas were linguistically as diverse as the Eurasian land mass. Native American languages can be classed into about a dozen different stocks (each as distinct from the other as the Semitic from the Indo-European) and within each stock into languages as distinct as English from Russian. Despite a dramatic decline of native languages, about two-hundred distinct languages are still spoken among American Indian peoples in North America. Although Indians represent less than 1 percent of the American people, this number is equal to the number spoken among the other 99 percent of the population combined (Hodgkinson 1990:1). This cultural diversity persists among American Indians to the present day, despite the popular perception among outsiders that they are a single distinct ethnic group.

The European invasion of North America had a pervasive and enduring impact on American Indian peoples and cultures. Examination of the effects of Indian-white contact illustrates the process by which a system of ethnic stratification develops. As we noted in Part 1, ethnocentrism is a system of social ranking in which one ethnic group acquires greater power, privilege, and prestige than another [or others]. An unequal relationship between two or more ethnic groups is not inevitable, however. In other words, some groups are not inherently dominant and others inherently subordinate; the establishment of a system of ethnic inequalities is the result of a historical process.

As mentioned in Part 1, Donald Noel (1968) has suggested that three conditions are necessary for a system of ethnic stratification to be created: ethnocentrism, competition, and differences in power. Noel applied these conditions to the development of the caste system of black-white relations in the United States, but let us here examine how these variables influenced patterns of Indian-white relations.

Ethnocentrism is the idealization of the attributes of the group to which an individual belongs. People of all societies tend to think of themselves as the chosen people or, at the very least, as those at the center of humanity. People of any society tend to think that their ways of doing things are correct, just, righteous, and virtuous—the way God intended. On the other hand, people tend to perceive the ways of other people as odd, incorrect, or immoral, and to reject or ridicule groups from which they differ. Ethnocentrism seems to be an inevitable outgrowth of the socialization process, during which cultural values and standards of right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, and so forth, are internalized.

Most European settlers regarded Native Americans as heathen savages, possessing cultures vastly inferior to their own. Indeed, among many Puritans of New England, Indians were regarded as agents of Satan, to be exterminated by gunfire or disease. The European invaders considered agriculture a superior economic activity and an index of their own cultural superiority. Therefore, they perceived the lands they entered to
be "wilderness"—in their eyes, wild, unoccupied, and unused territory. Europeans also sought to Christianize the Indians and to eliminate their traditional religious practices. The ethnocentrism that underlay the missionary impulse is exemplified by the following speech by a Boston missionary to a group of Seneca Indians:

There is but one religion, and but one way to serve God, and if you do not embrace the right way, you cannot be happy hereafter. You have never worshiped the Great Spirit in a manner acceptable to him; but have all your lives been in great errors and darkness. To endeavor to remove these errors, and open your eyes, so that you might see clearly, is my business with you. [quoted in Washburn 1964:210]

When two different ethnic groups come into initial contact, ethnocentrism is not restricted to one group. Rather, both sides respond with mutual ethnocentrism. Noel has noted this reciprocal process when he cites the reply of representatives of the Six [Indian] Nations to an offer by the Virginia Commission in 1744 to educate Indian youth at the College of William and Mary:

Several of our young people were formerly brought up at Colleges of the Northern Provinces; they were instructed in all your sciences; but when they came back to us, they were bad runners, ignorant of every means of living in the woods, unable to bear either cold or hunger, knew neither how to build a cabin, take a deer, or kill an enemy, spoke our language imperfectly, were therefore neither fit for hunters, warriors, or counselors; they were totally good for nothing. We are, however, not the less obliged by your kind offer, though we decline accepting it; and to show our grateful Sense of it, if the Gentlemen of Virginia will send us a Dozen of their Sons we will take great care of their education, instruct them in all we know and make Men of them. [quoted in Noel 1968]

It is clear that the American Indian leaders felt their ways to be superior to those of the Virginians.

The second condition necessary for a system of ethnic stratification to develop is competition; that is, two or more individuals or groups must strive for a goal or objective that only one can achieve. From the beginning of Indian-European contacts, competition between the two groups centered around land. American Indian and white looked on land differently. The former emphasized the notion of usufruct, or user's rights. The land could be occupied, hunted, cultivated, and otherwise used as long as a group wished. Once it was abandoned, it became available for use by others. To most Indian peoples, land was not something that could be individually owned or bought or sold, as Europeans conceived of it. Many land transactions between Native Americans and Europeans were based on radically different conceptions of what rights were being conveyed.

A system of ethnic stratification ultimately rests on differences in power. Initial contacts between Indians and whites usually took place in a context of equality and were not necessarily destructive of Indian cultures and societies. In fact, many items of white technology—especially guns, knives, cloth, fishhooks, pots, and other tools—were eagerly sought. For instance, it was only after the introduction of the horse by Europeans that the Plains Indian cultures flourished (Washburn 1964:66–70). The posture of equality is reflected by the white recognition of American Indian peoples as independent powers—nations [like the Cherokee Nation and the Navajo Nation]—and
by numerous diplomatic treaties, gifts, and even politically arranged marriages. (The marriage of Pocahontas and John Rolfe, for example, was primarily a political match to ensure the survival of early Virginia colonists.)

Initially, the desire of Europeans for land they could cultivate did not strain Indian-white relationships; but as the number of Europeans increased throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, their demand for land became the primary source of conflict with American Indians. Moreover, cultivation soon reduced the supply of game and forced an Indian retreat. The advance of European settlement eventually overwhelmed even the most resolute Indian resistance. Armed with superior military technology and bolstered by increasing numbers, Europeans moved inexorably westward. As the whites expanded westward, American Indian peoples were frequently expelled from their traditional settlements to lands beyond the immediate frontier. Removal was frequently legitimated by an underlying Anglo-Saxon ethnocentrism, exemplified by President Theodore Roosevelt’s assertion that “this great continent could not have been kept as nothing but a game preserve for squalid savages” [quoted in Lurie 1968:66].

As control of lands they had formerly occupied increasingly passed to whites, the status of American Indians came increasingly to resemble what C. Matthew Snipp (1986) has called “captive nations.” The Native American land base, which initially had been over 2 billion acres, dwindled to 155 million acres in 1871 and to 54 million acres in 1997 [Dorris 1981; U.S. Department of the Interior 1997]. Diseases carried by the Europeans, such as smallpox, scarlet fever, measles, and cholera, were fatal to large numbers of native peoples, who for centuries had been physically isolated from the Old World and had developed little or no resistance to these diseases. Epidemics ravaged American Indian peoples throughout American history, frequently killing more than half of a tribe. Washburn concludes that “unwittingly, disease was the white man’s strongest ally in the New World” [1975:107]. Moreover, substantial numbers of Indians died as a result of warfare with Europeans, policies of removal from ancestral lands, and deliberate extermination. The American Indian population, which had numbered between 5 and 6 million when Columbus reached the New World, dwindled to 237,000 by 1900 [Thornton 1987:32]. American Indians experienced a decline not only in their numbers but also in the number of tribes or ethnic groups—from an estimated 1,000 at the time of initial European contact to 318 officially recognized tribes residing in the lower 48 states in 1992 [Nagel 1996:4, 14].

The reservation system that developed most fully during the nineteenth century symbolized both the end of the era of Indian-white equality and the relegation of native peoples to a minority status. Most Indians had to obtain passes to leave the reservation, were denied the vote, and were forcefully prohibited from engaging in native religious and ceremonial practices. Traditional Indian cultures and patterns of authority were undermined as their economic resources eroded, their numbers plummeted, and the administration and control of the reservation were placed in the hands of white agents. Reservation peoples lost control over their fate. As a consequence, they came to resemble a “captive nation” characterized by white political domination.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, most white Americans agreed that Native Americans were a vanishing race and that forced assimilation—socialization to white culture—represented the most “humane” means of dealing with the dilemma of the American Indian’s continued existence. Whites employed a strategy of destroying
tribal governments, breaking up the reservations, and granting land to Indians on an individual basis. The federal government subsidized American Indian schools, many of which were controlled by white religious groups. In many instances, Indian children were forcibly taken from their families and enrolled in boarding schools, where they were compelled to adopt white styles of dress and were punished for speaking their own native languages (see Adams 1988). The underlying assumption of these policies was that Indians should be forced to give up their cultural heritages and to adopt the European values of rugged individualism, competition, and private enterprise. To ethnocentric whites, these values represented more "civilized" forms of behavior, in contrast to the "savage" practices of American Indians. In 1887 Carl Schurz, the German-born Secretary of the Interior, justified these practices: "The enjoyment and pride of individual ownership of property is one of the most effective civilizing agencies" (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1961:122). Theodore Roosevelt, reflecting the late nineteenth-century Social Darwinist theory that emphasized the "survival of the fittest," agreed: "This will bring the whites and Indians into close contact, and while, of course, in the ensuing struggle and competition many of the Indians will go to the wall, the survivors will come out American citizens" (Quoted in Washburn 1975:242).

Nevertheless, the striking feature of Native American Indian life in the twentieth century has been the ability of Indian cultures to endure. Despite intense pressures to assimilate into the mainstream of American society, American Indians have clung tenaciously to their cultural values, standards, and beliefs. Although plagued by the nation's poorest health standards, the American Indian population increased by 1990 to nearly 2 million, better than a 40 percent increase over 1980. Census Bureau estimates place the Native American population in 1998 at more than 2.3 million, nearly ten times the number a century ago. Moreover, Census Bureau projections estimate that by 2050 the American Indian population will reach 4.6 million (1.2 percent of the population) (Day 1993, Harris 1994b). This dramatic increase in the number of people identifying themselves as Native Americans reflects an Indian cultural and political renaissance during the past quarter century. During the 1960s and 1970s ethnic consciousness and political militancy, particularly among the younger and better educated, increased substantially. As a result, many people who once were ashamed of their Native American ancestry today acknowledge or assert it. In addition, some people may be motivated by special educational, medical, and economic benefits available to Indians through treaties with the federal government (Sipp 1997). Finally, the number of "wannabees"—whites for whom it is fashionable to proclaim Indian ancestry—may have increased (Nagel 1995, 1996).

As noted before, a substantial portion of American Indian lands were ceded to colonists and early settlers by treaties, first with the colonial British governments and later with the United States government. In signing these treaties, Indian peoples agreed to give up certain things (most frequently, land) in return for concessions and commitments to them by the United States government. Most treaties, which involved water, fishing, and territorial agreements, guaranteed that Indians would retain the treaty rights granted to them (including sovereignty over remaining lands) in perpetuity—as long as the grass shall grow and the rivers shall run." Treaties therefore form the basis of the unique legal and political status of American Indians today. In contrast to other American racial and ethnic minorities, American Indian tribes "are due certain privileges, protections, and benefits of yielding some of their sovereignty to the United
States" (Dorris 1981:54). Among these commitments are the obligations of the federal government to protect Indian lands and to provide social, medical, and educational services. These legal responsibilities, however, are invariably affected by national, state, and local politics, in which Indian interests are usually of little concern. Recently efforts by the Congress and the President to balance the federal budget led to cutbacks in programs critical to many American Indians. For example, between 1995 and 1996, the Federal repair budget for Indian housing was cut by one-third, leaving many Indians ill-equipped to confront the harsh winters in northern states (Brooke 1996: A1).

Despite persistent and recurring efforts to undermine the reservation system, these treaties did permit Indians to preserve some of their dwindling lands. Although the lands held by American Indians today represent only a small portion of those originally guaranteed in treaties, they include vast and extremely valuable agricultural, water, timber, fishing, and energy resources. However, until recently Indians have seldom received significant income from these resources because they have been developed and exploited primarily by non-Indian interests. For example, Indian reservations have provided water for the extensive urban development of the Southwest and have received almost nothing in return. Similarly, mining and mineral development on Indian lands has often resulted in exploitative leases that provided only a small fraction of the value of the resources being used; for example, because of leases signed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs on their behalf, in 1981 the Navajo Nation received 15 to 38 cents a ton for coal that was sold by American suppliers to foreign buyers for $70 a ton (Snipp 1986). Development also had a devastating effect on the environment of many reservations, destroying habitat, polluting streams and rivers, and desecrating Indian spiritual sites (Robbins 1997:17).

Snipp contends that the increasing attempts to develop and exploit American Indian resources for external economic interests reflect a shift in policy toward Indian peoples from "captive nationhood" to internal colonialism. The former represented political domination but did not dramatically disrupt the economic lives of American Indian people. Internal colonialism, on the other hand, involves economic as well as political domination. As pressures for development of the scarce resources found on tribal lands continue, such internal colonialism is likely to become more pronounced.

As a result, Native Americans are today among the poorest and least educated groups in American society. In 1989 Indian median household income was less than two-thirds (64 percent) that of whites; nearly one-third (31 percent) of Native Americans lived below the poverty level. The problems of poverty are especially acute on Indian reservations—the lands to which native peoples have title and over which they exercise sovereignty. Among reservation Indians, from one-third to one-half of all families have incomes below the poverty level; on some reservations the unemployment rates exceed 80 percent. By 1990, two-thirds (66 percent) of all Indians twenty-five and older had completed high school, compared with four-fifths (80 percent) of whites. The percentage of Indians at that age category (9.3 percent) who had graduated from college was less than half the percentage of whites (21.5) (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992b).

In response to the exploitation and depletion of their resources, Native Americans are increasingly challenging their political and economic domination by outsiders, and they are seeking to exert Indian control over reservation resources in order to address some of the severe economic problems confronting Indian peoples (Cornell 1988a). Indian activists have mounted legal challenges to ensure that the U.S. government
honors the terms of treaties that it has made with Indian tribes. In one of the most celebrated legal cases involving Indian claims that the Federal Government had not fulfilled its treaty obligations, in 1975 a Federal District judge awarded half the annual salmon catch in Puget Sound to Indian tribes who had signed an 1855 treaty with the United States (Egan 1992). Similarly, in 1990 the Passamaquoddy Indians gained a $40 million settlement of their land claims against the state of Maine, and the Puyallup (Washington) tribe ceded 20,000 acres of land in Tacoma for a $162 million package (Associated Press: 1990). New York Seneca Indians threatened to reclaim the lands on the Alleghehy reservation on which the town of Salamanca, New York, was built, under a ninety-nine year lease that expired in 1991. As part of the settlement, the annual lease payments of non-Indians living in Salamanca increased dramatically (New York Times June 11, 1990).

Indian activism has also been reflected in their efforts to develop organizations to advance Indian economic interests by resisting external exploitation of their resource base, including timber, water, and, especially, minerals. One of the most prominent of these has been the Council of Energy Resource Tribes (CERT), which was formed to promote Indian economic interests in the substantial coal, gas, oil, and uranium reserves that are found on Indian lands (Snipp 1986). Moreover, rather than lease their lands to drill for oil or gas or mine for coal, several tribes have formed their own high-technology mining ventures that enable them, rather than large energy companies, to retain the profits from these enterprises (Johnson 1994). As the powerful economic and political pressures intensify over increasingly scarce and valuable native resources, it seems inevitable that conflicts will increase in the future (Cornell 1988; Erdrich and Dorris 1988).

In addition to exploiting their own energy resources (Indian peoples have embarked on a number of other forms of economic development, such as tourism among the White Mountain Apache and Havasupai tribes of Arizona and the Nez Percé in northeastern Oregon; the Wisconsin Oneida and the Mississippi Choctaw have invested in plants that manufacture products as diverse as auto parts and greeting cards) (White 1990; Egan 1996).

Probably the most widely publicized enterprise that Indians have developed on reservations lands, however, is gambling. In 1987 the Supreme Court ruled that American Indian tribes had the authority to operate gambling enterprises on tribal lands and were exempt from most state gambling laws and regulations. The next year, Congress passed the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA) of 1988, which established federal regulations for the overall conduct of Indian gaming. By 1997, 184 tribes had opened gambling facilities and another 32 had such facilities in the planning stages. A study by the U.S. General Accounting Office (1997) found that during the decade between 1985 and 1995, income from Indian gaming rose dramatically, increasing from $125 million to over $4.5 billion. By 1995 Indian gaming accounted for at least 10 percent of all revenues from legal gambling in the United States; revenues generated by Indian casinos throughout the country were comparable to those of Atlantic City casinos and were more than half the revenues of Nevada casinos.

However, whether gambling is the solution to the problems of Native American poverty is questionable. Many critics—Indian and non-Indian—have criticized the social and cultural consequences of gambling and its corrosive effects on traditional Indian values (Dao 1993). Moreover, reservations located in areas remote from major
population centers encounter difficulties attracting patrons. The GAO study found that a few tribes [for example, the Pequot, a Connecticut tribe that operates Foxwoods, the nation's wealthiest casino] are doing very well; about half of all the Indian casino revenues were generated by just eight facilities that had incomes of over $100 million each. However, a majority of tribes had revenues of less than $15 million (U.S. General Accounting Office 1997), and their overall impact on tribal economic development was modest, at best. The Oglala Sioux of the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, for example, earned $1 million annually from their casinos—about $38 per capita [Kilborn 1997]. Despite widely publicized examples of casino-generated wealth, the vast majority of American Indian people have yet to experience an economic renaissance.

**European Americans**

The migratory movement of European peoples from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries has been the greatest in human history. Since the beginning of the seventeenth century, more than seventy million people have emigrated from Europe; about three-fourths of this number have come to the United States. The uprooting that millions of European immigrants experienced comprises one of the most dramatic sagas in American—indeed, world—history. This massive migration and its impact on American society, and the experience of European immigrants and their descendants have been widely described and debated among social historians and sociologists [Handlin 1951; Taylor 1971; Jones 1960, 1976; Seller 1977; Daniels, 1990; Dinnerstein, Nichols, and Reimers 1996; Dinnerstein and Reimers 1987; Bodnar 1985; Archdeacon 1983].

For nearly two centuries—from the beginning of the seventeenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century—the European population of America was overwhelmingly Protestant and British. The first European immigrants to settle permanently in what is now the United States were almost exclusively English. The first substantial English migration occurred between 1607 and 1660. The economic, legal, and political traditions that English settlers brought to America established an English foundation for American institutions, language, and culture. Although ethnic groups who later migrated contributed substantially to the distinctively American nature of political, economic, and social institutions, language and culture, they were also forced to adapt to the cultural and social systems that the English had established.

Although the English comprised the greatest proportion of the total colonial population, the middle colonies [New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware] contained substantial settlements of Germans, Dutch, Scotch-Irish, Scots, Swedes, and French Huguenots. Because the middle colonies contained the greatest variety of European cultures, they provided a context within which interethnic relations among European peoples in American society can first be observed. Here the ideal of America as a *melting pot*, in which diverse cultures come together to form a new people, was first formulated. In 1782 a *Frenchman*, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, wrote the following:

*What then is the American, this new man.... Here in America individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world.* (Crèvecoeur 1782/1957:39)