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## Anthropology in History and the Explanation of Cultural Diversity

### Chapter Outline

- The Roots of Canadian Anthropology
- Capitalism, Colonialism, and the Emergence of “The Field ”
  - The Key Metaphor of Capitalism
  - Responses to European Colonialism: The Fur Trade in North America
  - The Slave and Commodities Trades
  - “Modernity”
  - The Colonial Political Economy
  - Women and Colonization
- Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter
- Toward Classifying Forms of Human Society
  - Evolutionary Typologies: The Nineteenth Century
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    - Morgan’s “Ethnical Stages”
    - Reactions against Unilineal Evolutionism
  - Social Structural Typologies: The British Emphasis
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  - Attempting to Do without Typologies: Culture Area Studies in North America
  - Post-Colonial Realities
  - Locating Cultural Processes in History
- Studying Human Societies Today

### Key Points

1. The first anthropology department in Canada was founded at the University of Toronto in 1936 by Thomas McIlwraith. Anthropology in Canada has been influenced by American, British, and French approaches to anthropology.
2. Recent Western history has been characterized by the rise of **capitalism**. The key metaphor of capitalism is the world as a potential market in which everything—including land, objects, ideas, labour, and human beings—is a commodity to be bought and sold, not just used. Such a view

was unknown in non-capitalist societies before Western contact, even in those with highly developed economic institutions. The European capitalist penetration of non-Western societies was frequently followed by political conquest, which reshaped conquered societies in ways that often resulted in eventual economic exploitation. Colonial empires drew together economically and politically vast and previously unconnected areas of the world. To function intelligibly within the capitalist world order, colonized peoples had to begin to see the world as a storehouse of potential commodities.

3. Many populations that early anthropologists came to study did not escape the historical processes of colonization and incorporation into a capitalist world economy. Numerous Indigenous groups lost their autonomy as attempts were made to integrate them within the new colonial **political economy**. Many new groups came into existence in the course of commercial and political contacts between Indigenous populations and Europeans. The continued existence of descendants of colonized peoples shows that conquered peoples can actively cope to reshape their own social identities despite oppression and exploitation.
4. After anthropology emerged as a formal discipline in the late nineteenth century, the context of European or Euro-American **colonialism** was an ever-present reality within which anthropologists had to maneuver. Many hoped that the dismantling of colonial empires after World War II would restore sovereignty and dignity to colonized peoples. However, independence and **decolonization** did not free former colonies from deeply entangling colonial ties with their former rulers. These entanglements have, in some cases, persisted for over a hundred years and came to be called **neocolonialism**. In North America and elsewhere, Indigenous groups continue to seek social justice for the losses they have sustained as a consequence of colonization.
5. Although the colonial setting within which many anthropologists worked must always be taken into account, there is little evidence to suggest that anthropologists who worked in colonial settings were trying to further colonial domination. In fact, as demonstrated by Talal Asad, anthropological findings were often too specialized to be used by colonial administrators, especially compared to the enormous amount of information supplied to them by merchants, missionaries, and other government functionaries. Also, the motives that led anthropologists to carry out work under colonial conditions were complex and variable.
6. A survey of the **typologies** used by anthropologists over the past century and a half to make sense of human cultural variation is illuminated by the historical circumstances surrounding contact between anthropologists and those with whom they have worked. Depending on an anthropologist's analytical purposes, the same social forms can be classified in different ways. The earliest important anthropological typology of forms of human society was proposed by **unilineal cultural evolutionists**, such as E.B. Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan, in the nineteenth century. Anthropologists who supported unilineal evolution tried to explain contemporary cultural diversity by arguing that different examples of society existing in the nineteenth century represented various stages of societal evolution. Every human society either had passed or would pass through the same stages. British anthropologists doing research in colonial settings in the first half of the twentieth century paid attention to the social structural forms of contemporary communities and showed how these structures enabled the communities to function successfully over time. They produced a succession of non-evolutionary classifications of human social forms.

7. Following the influence of Franz Boas, who developed an approach of **historical particularism**, North American anthropologists rejected unilineal cultural evolutionism on the grounds that societies could easily borrow cultural forms from one another, thus skipping supposedly universal evolutionary stages. Boasian attention to forms of social and cultural mixing also highlighted the biological mixing that always takes place when human groups meet, providing a context within which biological anthropologists were eventually able to demonstrate the fact that biological races do not exist. Consequently, the aim of much research shifted to making lists of **culture traits** and mapping the **culture areas** through which they had spread as a result of cultural borrowing.
8. Since the end of colonialism, new classifications have appeared, such as the Cold War division of nation-states into First, Second, Third, and Fourth Worlds, and the contrast between “developed” First World societies and “underdeveloped” Third World societies. While some anthropologists were always dissatisfied with these distinctions, they have become increasingly problematic since the end of the Cold War. Although some anthropologists may find typologies useful for investigating some issues, classifying forms of human society is not an ultimate goal for most anthropologists today, and this would seem to suggest that an early basis for anthropological comparison is also disappearing. But a shift in contemporary ethnography to the study of ongoing social and cultural processes has led to the emergence of work that focuses on comparisons of similar processes as they unfold over time in different social and cultural settings.
9. While **globalization** began during the age of exploration as part of the expansion of market capitalism it has continued to reshape international relationships in many domains. The export and import of human beings to provide services has become a central element of many countries agriculture and service economies. While we often focus on negative aspects of globalization, it can also be demonstrated that it can be a mechanism of human liberation. The detachment of life from territorially based statuses can enhance mobility and opportunity for people that lack territorially based options.
10. The development of advanced science and technology in many modern societies has provided anthropology with many varied and interesting topics of study. Not long ago notions of a cyborg anthropology seemed more like science fiction than sound anthropological research. Today with the expansion of human-computer and human-machine interconnections and interfaces cyborg anthropology faces an ever expanding base of topics for research. These connections touch virtually every aspect of modern life influencing education, medicine, politics, business, law, leisure and many others.

## Key Terms

**Band** A form of social organization that consists of a small group of foragers (usually fewer than fifty people), in which labour is divided according to age and sex, and social relations are highly egalitarian.

**Capitalism** An economic system dominated by a supply and demand market designed to create capital and profit.

**Chieftdom** A form of social organization in which the leader (a chief) and the leader's close relatives are set apart from the rest of society and allowed privileged access to wealth, power, and prestige.

**Colonialism** The cultural domination of a people by larger, wealthier powers.

**Culture area** A geographical region in which cultural traditions share similar culture traits.

**Culture traits** Particular features or parts of a cultural tradition such as a dance, ritual, or style of pottery.

**Cyborg anthropology** Anthropological analysis based on the notion of organism-machine hybrids that attempts to understand the broader implications of human-machine coevolution.

**Decolonization** The withdrawal of a colonial power from a territory that had been under its control.

**Diachronic** An analysis that considers one entity as it changes over time.

**Globalization** The reshaping of local conditions by powerful global forces on an ever intensifying scale.

**Historical particularism** The study of cultures in their own historical contexts.

**Humanism** A philosophical and ethical stance emphasizing the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively that favours critical thinking and evidence.

**Imperialism** A system in which one country controls other, less powerful territories through colonization, often augmented by military force.

**Neocolonialism** The persistence of profound social and economic ties linking former colonial territories to their former colonial rulers despite political sovereignty.

**Political economy** A social structure that is organized around material (economic) interests that are protected and enhanced through the use of power (politics).

**Science studies** Research that explores the interconnections among the socio-cultural, political, economic, and historic conditions that make scientific research possible and successful.

**Small-scale society** A community of several dozen to several hundred people usually held together by family (kinship) ties and often engaged in traditional subsistence activities.

**Social forms** Culturally conforming collective ways of interacting with our surroundings and the people we encounter; these forms of interaction, often taken for granted, are encoded forms of behaviour that are enforced by the group.

**Social structure** The enduring aspects of the social forms in a society, including its political and kinship systems.

**State** A stratified society, controlled by a formal government, which possesses a territory that is defended from outside enemies with an army and from internal disorder with police.

**Structural-functional theory** A position that explores how particular social forms function from day-to-day in order to reproduce the traditional structure of the society.

**Synchronic** An analysis that focuses on structural similarities and differences within the same timeframe.

**Tribe** A form of social organization generally larger than a band, in which members usually farm or herd for a living; social relations are relatively egalitarian, although there may be a chief who speaks for the group.

**Typology** A classification system based on systematic organization into types on the basis of shared qualities.

**Unilineal cultural evolutionism** A nineteenth-century theory that proposed a series of stages through which all societies must go (or had gone) in order to reach civilization.

**White man's burden** European's sense that it was their duty to colonize, rule, and "civilize" all people they viewed as being "savage."

## Review Questions

1. In what ways has Canadian anthropology been influenced by both British and American traditions?
2. How did capitalism impact small-scale societies?
3. What was the relationship between anthropology and colonialism? Are there any ways that this relationship continues in a neocolonial context?
4. What effect did "white man's burden" have on the First Nations groups in Canada?
5. What are the advantages of adopting the typologies used by earlier anthropologists? What are the disadvantages? Can you think of any typologies currently in use?
6. What are some of the sources or factors contributing to cultural change?
7. What is the role of cultural borrowing in the world today? What role does globalization play in this?
8. What is the significance of the Fourth World?

9. The authors of your textbook suggest that the basis for anthropological comparison is disappearing; yet, some anthropologists, through a shift to a study of cultural processes, are still able to use the comparative method. Find an example of this and discuss.
10. In what ways are classifications such as First and Third World similar to earlier typologies? Are these classifications useful? Why or why not?
11. What role do you think fieldwork played in changing dominant paradigms in anthropology?
12. Is our relationship with smart phones, the Internet and associated wearable technologies already taking us in the direction of a kind of cyborg culture?
13. Do you think the world's cultures will become more uniform in the future as globalization expands our interconnections?
14. Discuss how scientific research and the development of technology is also embedded in the culture in which it occurs.

## Additional Resources

### Films

- *The Other Side of the Ledger: An Indian View of the Hudson's Bay Company*. Directed by Martin Defalco and Willie Dunn. National Film Board of Canada. 1972.

This documentary looks at the conflicting views and memories of the Hudson's Bay Company on their 300th anniversary.

[http://www.nfb.ca/film/other\\_side\\_of\\_the\\_ledger](http://www.nfb.ca/film/other_side_of_the_ledger)

- "The Difference Between Us," *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, episode 1 California Newsreel. 2003.

This episode shows that despite what we've always believed, the world's peoples simply don't come bundled into distinct biological groups. The episode begins by following a dozen students, including Black athletes and Asian string players, who sequence and compare their own DNA to see who is more genetically similar. The results surprise the students and the viewer, when they discover their closest genetic matches are as likely to be with people from other "races" as their own.

[http://www.pbs.org/race/000\\_About/002\\_04-about-01.htm](http://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-about-01.htm)

- "The Story We Tell," *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, episode 2 California Newsreel. 2003.

Episode two, "The Story We Tell" traces the origins of the racial idea to the European conquest of the New World and to the American slave system—the first ever where all the slaves shared similar physical traits and a common ancestry. Historian James Horton points out that the enslavement of Africans was opportunistic, not based on beliefs about inferiority: "[Our forebears] found what they considered an endless labor supply. People who could be readily identified and

so when they ran away they couldn't melt into the population like Native Americans could. People who knew how to grow tobacco, people who knew how to grow rice. They found the ideal, from their standpoint, the ideal labor source.”

[http://www.pbs.org/race/000\\_About/002\\_04-about-02.htm](http://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-about-02.htm)

- *In Search of the Hamat'sa: A Tale of Headhunting*. [DVD.] Aaron Glass, producer and director. Wauertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources, 2004. 33 min.

This film traces the history of anthropological depictions of the dance and, through the return of archival materials to a First Nations community, presents some of the ways in which diverse attitudes toward this history inform current performances of the Hamat'sa.

<http://www.der.org/films/in-search-of-hamatsa.html>

### Annotated Video Links

- **A Short History of Globalization**

This video summarizes the key points of early forms of globalization and contrasts them with modern forms of globalization.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D63\\_Ps4UN-I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D63_Ps4UN-I)

- **We Are All Cyborgs Now**

Amber Case, a cyborg anthropologist, discusses how we all rely on external brains and are in some sense cyborgs whether we know it or not.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1KJAXM3xYA>

- **Confronting our Colonialism**

A short dialogue between two women exploring Canadian colonialism, its repercussions for First Nations and the road to decolonization.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njldjUy7v4>

### Websites

- “A Brief History of Anthropology at the University of Toronto”

A review of the key figures in Canadian anthropological history

<http://anthropology.utoronto.ca/about/history>

## A Critical Look

BY ROBERTA ROBIN DODS

### Classifications and Colonial Reality

In the distorted, self-deluded gazes of eighteenth-century colonialists, the Americas were empty lands—blank spaces that lacked definition and purpose. Moreover, the peoples of the Americas



were seen as ineffective overseers of their world, lacking the Europeans' drive to possess and conquer the land. But this view missed—or perhaps willfully ignored—the fact that Indigenous peoples had their own ways of managing themselves and the resources of the land. Why were Europeans so blind? In short, it was in their best interests to be blind. After all, recognizing the value of Indigenous peoples and their approaches to the land would have threatened European's intent to exploit the “new world” for economic gain.

By labelling the land as “empty,” the Europeans effectively classified it as less valuable than their own lands back home, which were “full” of factories, businesses, houses, streets, and farms. Similarly, by labelling Indigenous peoples as “ineffective,” “passive,” and “without purpose,” the Europeans were classifying them as inferiors who lacked the qualities they prided in themselves. Such classification schemes reveal a fundamental flaw with systems that try to categorize human beings in terms of *better* and *worse*: the people defining the categories are inevitably the ones who come out on top.

Of course, there were subtle differences in the ways the colonizers of the United States and those of Canada labelled and interpreted the lands and the peoples beyond their settlements. To the former, the borderlands were a *frontier* to new possibilities—the place where Euro-Americans could prove their worth by making the land useful to them. With enough effort, they believed, they could achieve their manifest destiny of civilizing all corners of the new world. To the latter, these lands were a dangerous *wilderness*—a vast and frightening wild land that needed to be survived before it could be tamed and tamed before it could be understood. In both views, Indigenous peoples were at best labelled simply as “others”; at worst, they were labelled as troublesome “savages” to be either “civilized” or destroyed.

The act of labelling Indigenous peoples as “others” is not as harmless as it may at first seem. For one thing, “other” is a rather empty label. It dismisses what is being labelled (in this case, human beings) as not worthy of serious thought or consideration. Further, in the colonial context, it separates the colonizer from the colonized, and it implicitly establishes the colonizer as the standard against which all others should be measured. By giving colonizers the higher status, it also implicitly gives them permission to treat the colonized as lesser beings. As history has shown, again and again, this sort of approach will lead only to tragedy.



Our challenge as anthropologists—and as human beings—is to learn from the mistakes of our ancestors. We must be wary of classifying people as “different” from ourselves and instead focus on the similarities. We must resist ethnocentric impulses. Above all, we must remain open to other people’s ways of living and perspectives on life. Only by remaining open can we arrive at a deeper understanding of cultural differences.