

# **Social geography of the United States**

**J.Wreford Watson**

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## Preface

People make places. The North America of the Indians was very different from what it became under the Whites: and that part of it developed by the Americans differed in striking ways from portions left to Canadians and Mexicans. Americans secured the heartland of the continent, gripped by the dream of a free, dynamic, competitive and democratic society, with an ever higher standard of living for the common man. They matched the opportunities of a rich environment with the genius of an even richer mind. But success cost conflict. The clash of culture, race riots, alienation, and depravation soon marked the land. Hence, social factors came to dominate the scene, and geography took on the lineaments of society.

Social geography is an analysis not only of how people make place, but of how they think they do so: it is concerned with the perceptions behind the patterns. To get at these, it should tap various sources and use a variety of approaches. Crucial to geography is to *savour* a place – or rather, savour the difference between places. This comes with personal acquaintance and observation, or, short of that, with reliance on accounts based on experience and understanding. Yet to live in a place can be to be blind to it, especially in terms of other areas: comparisons and contrasts are essential. Personal prejudices, though taken account of, must be weighted by dispassionate assessment: facts and figures are of the essence.

This book concerns itself with individual views, but also with an impersonal overview of the American scene, using the speeches and reports of eminent persons who either created geography in their day or illuminated it; together with the appraisal of novelists and poets, with a strong sense of place, who described and interpreted it, and at the same time with the statistics and statistical analysis that gave an objective model of the whole. It also refers to acts of government that actually changed the geography of the land, and stamped the American image on America.

The attempt has been made to adapt method to subject. The Indian problem is taken up mainly through peoples' images and government policy; the negro question through the voice of individuals and the testimony of statistics; the clash of cultures by way of the regional novel supported by impersonal surveys; poverty and crime from the weight of statistics. The statistical approach is used of youth, sex, and age in the American population. Status divisions are given force through novelists of the poor and of the rich. The social geography of the city appeals to a wide range of support, from the research of scholars, the novelist's insight, and the speeches of city fathers to the say of statistics and the arguments of enactment. The great debate between individualism and the community goes back to what individual men and communal leaders actually did - or are doing. The deep concern for conservation, welfare, and above all - well-being, looks at the debate of educators and congressmen, and appeals to those acts of government by which Americans are reshaping the American environment.

Thus, consideration of fact and perception, of behaviour and belief, of personal interpretation and public action, of statistical analysis and the 'great American dream', are all used, so as to bring out the realities of man and environment in the making of America.

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## **The importance of the social factor: problems and prospects**

The geography of any country is what people see in it, want from it and do with it. In few places has that been more apparent than in America. Before European invasion, a sparsely settled area, it is now the fourth largest country in the world with 220 million people. This has resulted from a social explosion almost without parallel. As a consequence, the landscape has become dominated by the social factor. A social geography of America has evolved, reflecting the structure of society, the ends people have, and the means at their disposal. Essentially, this geography has been made through solving problems, and exploiting prospects.

### **The problem of the American image**

First and foremost is the problem created by America's image of itself. This grew out of two things: the breakaway from the Old World, and the breakthrough to the New. There was the rather negative attitude of breaking away from, renouncing and even repudiating the past, and the more positive aim of breaking through to something different and new in the future. Both of these aspects of how America saw itself are important for geography. Breaking away meant leaving behind Old-World uses of land and patterns of settlement. Though, to begin with, the manorial system was represented, it gradually broke up, especially as agriculture became more commercialized and specialized. The old tenurial holdings, tied cottages and farm villages disappeared. Even in the South, where tenantry is still characteristic, owner-occupation has become more dominant. New land-survey systems were devised, which, at any rate in the North and West, were based on the planner's drawing board, and laid down with geometrical precision. Cities, too, developed on the grid system and, within these limits, were shaped by the

competition for land. There was a new emphasis on land-values, and a new ordering of settlement in terms of individual status.

### *The American stress on newness*

Whatever was *new*, indeed, the new itself became increasingly the hallmark of America. 'He is an American', said Crèvecoeur at the Revolution, 'who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives *new* ones from the *new* mode of life he has embraced. Here individuals of all nations are moulded into a *new* race of men.' Crèvecoeur (1782:1963) specifically linked these images with the landscape, pointing out that America had broken away from the dominance of institutions, like castle and cathedral, to become centred in the works of the individual, like farms and businesses.

The sense of a new American order was nowhere greater than on the frontier. 'American development has been continually beginning over again', wrote Turner in 1893. 'This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion . . . furnish the forces dominating the American character.' They certainly came to dominate the landscape. Turner was writing about the challenge of the frontier, and of winning new land. And for a long time this represented a major part of the geography of newness, the urge to find more land and develop it, possibly in new ways. The national and foreign demand for cheap food led to the clearance of three-quarters of the forest, and the breaking up of four-fifths of the sod – major geographical changes – in the development of farmland. Increasingly, this was done on a very large scale through extensive mechanization. This was described by Moody in 1879, who wrote 'within the past year or two a new development in agriculture has forced itself upon public attention'. This consisted of farm companies buying up blocks of from 20,000 to 100,000 acres of land, using gangs of a dozen or more ploughs to break up the soil, and teams of harvesters to cut the wheat, all under expert agricultural managers.

Changes like these have obviously affected the landscape to a tremendous extent, reducing the number of units of production but increasing their size, cutting down on the number of producers, making the machine dominate the scene, and providing a higher personal standard of living by way of houses, cars, aeroplanes, schools, telecommunications, roads, parks, and so forth, than anywhere else in the world.

Newness also made a great deal of difference to *urban* geography, in the forefront of change. Nathaniel Hawthorne (1851:1964) makes one of his characters, Holgrave, cry in *The House of the Seven Gables*, 'Shall we never get rid of the Past!' and to hope:

*We shall live to see the day, I trust, when no man shall build his house for posterity. If each generation were expected to build its own houses,*

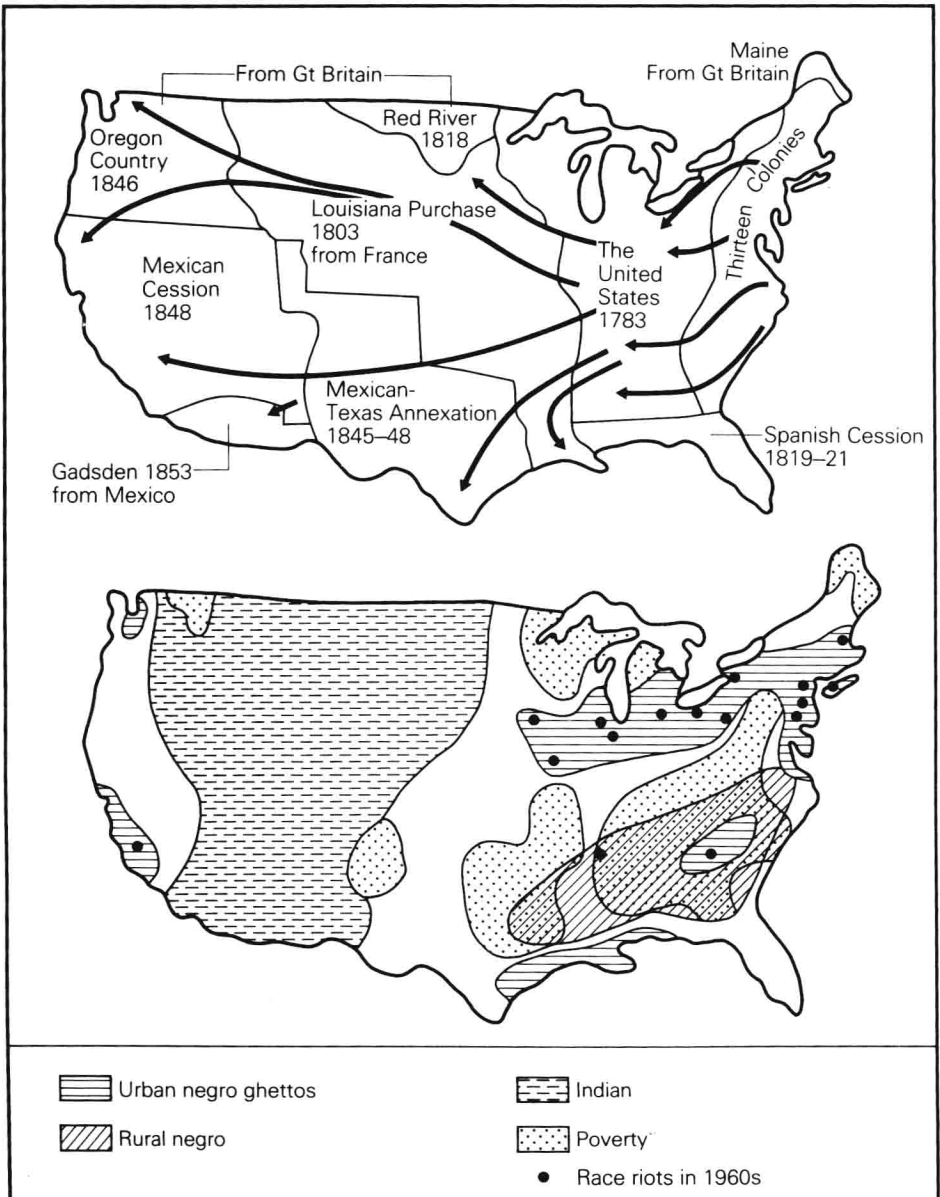
*that single change, would imply almost every reform which society is now suffering for. I doubt whether even our public edifices – our capitols, state-houses, court-houses, city-halls, and churches – ought to be built of such permanent materials as stone or brick. It were better that they should crumble to ruins, once in twenty years, as a hint to the people to re-examine and reform the institutions which they symbolize.*

In another generation, Henry James was to write of the extraordinary rapidity with which American cities changed. They had a positive thirst for newness. 'One story is good only till another is told, and skyscrapers are the last word in ingenuity only until another word be written.' This is still true today. Citified America is growing at 1.8 per cent per annum compared with America as a whole, at 1.1 per cent. Furthermore, the newest part of urban areas, that outside the central cities, in the huge sprawl of the suburbs into the countryside, is growing at 2.4 per cent. Such rapid expansion of the urban fabric is one of America's greatest problems: new schools, new shopping centres, new hospitals, new housing, new roads have to be built at a phenomenal rate. All this goes with the state of mind which, in Henry Adams's famous phrase, made 'the American stand in the world a *new order of man*'.

*The American sense of destiny* was part of the American image. The first British settlers in both Virginia and New England had a strong belief that they were helping to make destiny. This might be no more than 'building a foundation for posterity', in the words of Captain John Smith, or it might be following the conviction, such as Edward Johnson held, that 'Christ creates a New England to muster His forces in . . . intending to make [it] the very wonder of this Age'. The American Revolution deepened this sense of destiny. In justifying America's split from England, Thomas Paine wrote, 'the time likewise at which the continent was discovered, adds weight to the argument [for separation], and the manner in which it was peopled, increases the force of it. The Reformation was preceded by the discovery of America, as if the Almighty graciously meant to open a sanctuary in future years. . . .' George Washington, before retiring from the first presidency of the newly founded state, wished to congratulate his fellow citizens 'on the glorious events which Heaven has been pleased to produce in our favor'. Another of America's founding fathers, Jefferson, spoke of America, in his Inaugural Address, as 'a rising nation . . . advancing rapidly to destines beyond the reach of mortal eye'. He himself helped destiny forward by extending America's boundaries from the Mississippi to the Rockies in one great leap, through the Louisiana Purchase of 1803.

The ordinary American was often in front of his leaders. When the Indian Line, dividing White from Indian territory, stood along the Appalachian divide, Americans had poured across it to the Ohio; when the Indian Line was moved to Ohio, pioneers were already along the Wabash. As Billington (1960) repeatedly points out in his *Westward Expansion* the 'colonies

of the West showed a dangerous tendency to take matters into their own hands'. The Southwest was opened up by 'aggressive expansionists, eager to overrun international boundaries in their search for wealth'. The Northwest was invaded by swarms of 'lawless adventurers staking out their tomahawk



**Fig. 1.1** *Growth and conflict.* A sense of 'manifest destiny' prompted the United States to take over the heart of North America from Britain, France, Spain and Mexico, but expansion led to clashes of race and culture and economic and social inequalities.

claims . . . firm in the belief that every American had an undoubted right to pass into every vacant country . . .'. even though it might have been designated Indian Territory, by official treaty.

They swept aside not only the treaty agreements with the Indians but the legal claims of Britain in Canada, of Spain in Florida, and the Mexicans in Texas and California. In the 1845 crisis over Oregon, in which Britain was trying to preserve its rights, based on early partitions with Spain, O'Sullivan, a famous American journalist wrote, 'Away, away with all these cobweb tissues of rights of discovery, exploration, settlement, contiguity, etc.' These were nothing as compared with 'the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and self-government entrusted to us'.

This sort of image gave Americans a sense of superiority that tempted them into imperial expansion. It created a very grave problem of international relations which has been with America ever since - the problem of whether to isolate itself from foreign involvements or become leaders in world affairs. American expansion has certainly been one of the great makers of American geography, and, indeed, of the geography of the world.

Thus, it may be seen that the American image has had a great deal to do with the American scene. The way Americans have viewed themselves has affected their use of America. Consequently, the American image is the basic frame of reference of American geography. It forms the parameters in which specific problems and prospects are set. For example, the longing to do a new thing, and the sense of becoming a new people, created growth and expansion that then caught up many other ideas and sentiments into the American way, each one of which raised further national issues. The rapid growth of America (see Fig. 1.1) pushed by an almost excessive individualism and vested with a high sense of destiny, led to bitter competition for the land with Indians, enslaved the Negro, exploited the immigrant, produced sharp clashes in religion, induced grave economic inequalities, brought America into conflict with other nations, and jeopardized the environment throughout much of the continent. These and other problems were the cost of expansion. Nevertheless, expansion opened the prospects of high standards of living, and the strength to serve people in need throughout the world.

## **The Indian problem**

Not unnaturally, the question of how to behave towards the Indians became one of the first and most pressing issues that faced the European invaders of North America. It straightaway posed itself to the Americans as they took over from the British in the march across the

continent. The Americans, of course, inherited many of their ideas and policies from colonial days. However, it is important to realize that they had just thrown off colonial control, and that they had done so in a bitter civil war. The Americanism that had been prepared to take on the English did not hesitate to tackle the Indian. In the spirit of the War of Independence, men contested whatever land they could win: if the English had had to go to the wall, so much more the Indian.

The attitude reinforced the aggressiveness which had, in fact, already grown up. When the Narragansetts sent a bundle of arrows tied up in a snake's skin to warn off the Plymouth settlers, they drew counter-threats upon themselves: the settlers 'sent them a rounde answer that, if they had rather have warre than peace, they might begin when they would'. Americans saw comparatively empty land in front of them, and were determined to put it to good use. Even if we accept the most generous estimate of the native population at the time when the Whites arrived, which Dobyns and Thompson have put at 12 millions north of the Rio Grande, it would still give a density of only 3.3 persons per square mile. At the lower, and probably more realistic, estimate of some 6 millions, there would have been less than 1 person per square mile. Of course the densities varied enormously from the passably peopled parts along the Atlantic Coast Plain, in the Lower Great Lakes-Mohawk Valley, in the Ohio Basin, and the Gulf Coast Plain, to really empty areas in the drier Great Plains and the desert basins of the trans-Rocky West. But even in areas like Virginia where the Indians practised agriculture as well as hunting and fishing, and had many small villages, there were still great stretches of comparatively unused country that made the *wilderness* more impressive to the first settlers than *made land*. Captain Smith (1624: 1967) remarked of Virginia, 'The land is not populous . . . for they [the Indians] make so small a benefit of their land. Within thirty leagues of sailing we saw not any, being a barren country.'

At the time that America gained its independence there were (1790) over 3,900,000 settlers, living between the Atlantic coast and the Ohio, giving a density of 4.5 people per square mile. The land had been rapidly taken up, and the pressure of white encroachment was beginning to bear down on the Indians. Frequent conflicts broke out, and the Indians were pushed back first beyond the Appalachians, next to the Ohio, following that the Mississippi, and eventually the Rockies. The Indian population fell drastically. Jefferson, quoting the Virginia enumeration of 1669, said that, within a man's lifetime 'the tribes . . . were reduced to about one-third of their former numbers. Spiritous liquors, the small-pox, war, and an abridgement of territory to a people who lived on the spontaneous productions of nature, had committed terrible havoc among them.' This havoc continued until a low point was reached in 1850 when the numbers, for the whole of the United States, had dropped to only 250,000. The Indians had been steadily driven off



their lands and confined to smaller and smaller areas (mostly in the arid West) which were not economic for white men to colonize. The whole geography of Indian America was changed. Their most populous parts, east of the Mississippi and south of the Great Lakes, had become virtually depleted, while their least settled areas, in the High Plains and Intermontane Basins became, perforce, their main abiding place. This was the result, not of natural influences, but of social forces taking over the most favoured areas for the Whites, and leaving the least productive districts to the Indians. After the Indian wars finally ended, in the 1870s, numbers increased until today they are over 800,000. Indians now have a rate of increase above the national average, which should bring their numbers to 1,250,000 by AD 2000. However, this would still leave them a very small minority, about 0.41 of the then total population. They would still be confined mostly to the West.

## **The negro problem**

The white sense of destiny that had driven the Indian west, replaced him by the Negro in the East and South. The desire for rapid development, coupled with an extreme shortage of labour in colonial days, led to the use of imported African slaves. The American feeling of superiority confirmed this practice, even though Americans had come into being fighting for freedom. Slavery remained. By the time consciences began to stir, and the importation of Negroes to America was forbidden in 1807, the negro population was self-perpetuating: most Negroes had big families. The infamous practice of breeding slaves, to beat the ban on importation, forced numbers up still more. By 1850 when the Indian population had reached its nadir of only 250,000, the number of Negroes had climbed to over 3,600,000. Most of these were east of the Mississippi and south of the Ohio and Delaware: that is, in areas once most well peopled by Indians. Thus, through white intervention a complete reversal in geography had taken place: brown skins had given way to black, though white supremacy was still maintained.

Having slaves gave status. On the other hand it gave offence, especially to those looking for a New Eden. Soon the situation divided the Whites; and the Civil War broke out. The results of this still further affected negro geography. Freed at last, Negroes began to move. The map of negro distribution saw a shift from country to town, and then from southern to northern town, and next from northern to western town. Once confined to the Southeast, the Negro filled the United States. But he had not escaped conflict: it followed him into every town where, as Jefferson feared, 'deep-rooted prejudice entertained by the Whites, ten thousand recollections by the Blacks of the injuries they had received', parted one group from the other and led to one of America's major problems, the black ghettos. With the continuing