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L2: Semester 1 / 2020-2021
Course: Colonial History of America

2. General overview of the colonization of America

Objectives

After this first lecture, students should:

- ✓ be familiar with the indigenous peoples of the Americas during the pre-Colombian era
- ✓ be able to analyze a map showing migration of people to the North American continent
- ✓ be aware of the concept of *terra nullius* and the doctrine of discovery and their implications

Introduction

Lecture 2 deals with the settlement of the North American continent by the different indigenous peoples who came to the region to live in it.

1. First people of North America

Native Americans first settled the Americas (North and South America) and the present-day United States when they migrated from Eurasia across Beringia, a land bridge that connected Siberia to present-day Alaska during the Last glacial Period, and then spread southward throughout the American continent. Migrations may have begun as early as 30,000 years ago and continued to about 10,000 years ago until the land bridge became submerged by the rising sea level at the onset of the current interglacial period (See the map below).



The first people to reach North America were Asian hunters and nomads. Once in Alaska, it took these first North Americans, the ancestors of Native American tribes thousands of years to work their way south to what is now the United States.

Around that time, the bison, a wild animal like cow with long hair, became the principal source of food for these early North Americans. Gradually, foraging and the first attempts at agriculture appeared.

Indians in what is now Mexico led the way, cultivating corn, squash and beans, perhaps as early as 8,000 B.C. This knowledge spread northward. By 3,000 B.C., a primitive type of corn was being grown in the river valleys of New Mexico and Arizona. Then the first signs of irrigation began to appear, and by 300 B.C., signs of early village life. By all accounts, Indian society in North America was closely tied to the land. Most tribes, particularly in the wooded eastern region and the Midwest, combined aspects of hunting, gathering and the cultivation of maize and other products for their food supplies. Indian life was essentially clan-oriented and communal, with children allowed more freedom and tolerance than was the European custom of the day.

2. Of *terra nullius* and the doctrine of discovery

Terra nullius means “nobody’s land”. It is a doctrine that has existed in Western countries for centuries and means that ownership by seizure of a thing no one owns is legitimate. *Terra nullius* was a principle sometimes used in international law to justify claims that territory may be acquired by a state’s occupation of it. The *terra nullius* principle was employed by the sixth president of the United States John Quincy Adams to refer to “uncultivated lands” by identifying them as supposedly unclaimed wilderness. However, these lands were occupied by Native Americans who lived there as nomads by moving constantly in search of water and the bison.

As with the discredited notion of *terra nullius*, the doctrine of discovery was also used by Westerners to legitimize the colonization of indigenous peoples in the Americas. It was used to dehumanize, exploit and subjugate Native Americans and dispossess them of their most basic rights.

The doctrine of discovery provided a philosophical framework for Christian explorers, to lay claim to territories uninhabited by Christians. The doctrine was strongly held by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain who financed Christophe Columbus’ first expedition to America.

Between the mid-fifteenth century and the mid-twentieth century, the doctrine of discovery allowed European entities to seize lands inhabited by indigenous peoples under the guise of discovery. In 1494, the Treaty of Tordesillas declared that only non-Christian lands could be colonized under the doctrine of discovery. In 1792, U.S. Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson claimed that the European doctrine of discovery was international law which would also apply equally to dealings the U.S. government would have with non-Christian lands. The doctrine of discovery continues to influence American imperialism and treatment of indigenous peoples. But today this racist principle must be repudiated by United Nations.

Conclusion

- ✓ Class discussion
 - ✓ Study question: Can you apply the doctrine of discovery and / or the *terra nullius* principle to Algeria?
- Our country suffered terribly because of French colonization. What do you make of French colonization? Did France use any deceiving principle to colonize our country? Give some examples.