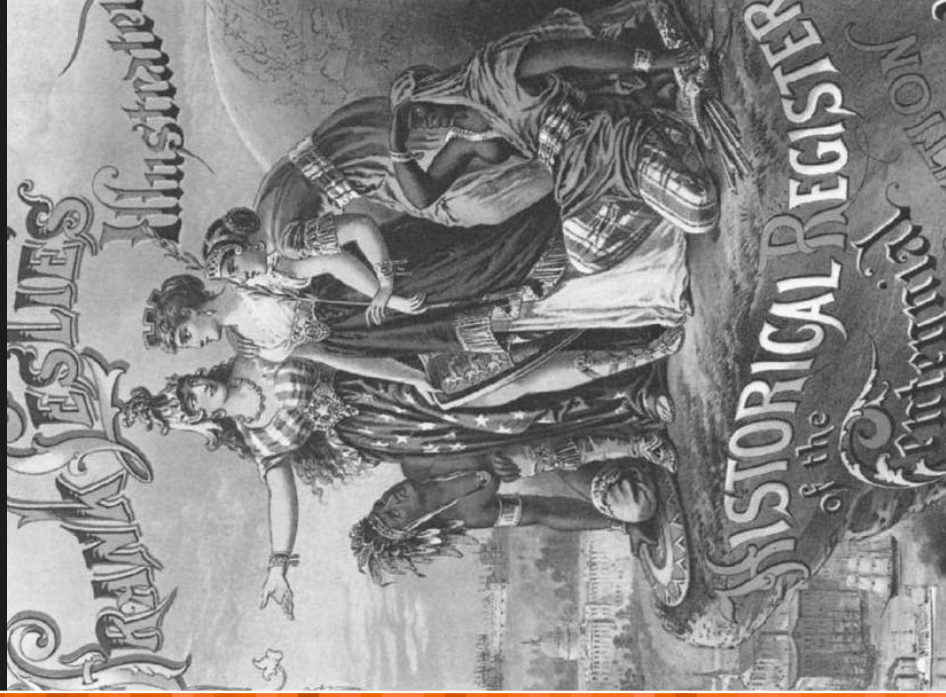


American Cultural History



From the Colonial Period to the End
of the 19th Century
An Anthology and Companion

Edited by Bernd Engler and Oliver Scheiding



Key Concepts in American Cultural History

From the Colonial Period to the End of the 19th Century

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Key Concepts in American Cultural History, a collection of 320 documents from the colonial period to the end of the 19th century, follows a twofold approach: It focuses on historical contexts that encompass central ideas and thoughts that are closely linked to particular epochs in American culture. It is furthermore based on the observation that, in spite of its diversity, American culture is informed by a relatively limited set of ideas which were highly adaptable to new social and political situations. Thus, these ideas could be easily appropriated to individual and communal needs for orientation and sense-making in a world that dramatically changed while America developed from a colonial society to an industrialized world power. The fact that the number of the concepts that define American culture is quite restricted has proven to be an enormous advantage in the formation of an 'American ideology,' as the constant re-articulation of these concepts and their ensuing 'visibility' in the public sphere guaranteed wide-spread identification with the beliefs and cultural norms they represented and propagated. This anthology wants to encourage cross-segmental and diachronic readings that make the student aware of the discontinuities as well as simultaneous continuities of ideological 'formations.' These very formations are permanently 're-formed' in response to the changing functions they have to perform in order to promote beliefs by which cultures negotiate contesting interpretations of social reality.

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A Companion to American Cultural History

From the Colonial Period to the End of the 19th Century

Edited by Bernd Engler and Oliver Scheiding

As a companion piece to the anthology *Key Concepts in American Cultural History*, this volume mirrors the overall design of the original collection of documents. But while the collection of documents could only offer limited introductory explanations of the hidden continuities as well as the transformations of the key concepts embedded in the documents, the essays of this volume analyze the ideological trajectories of those concepts in depth. The essays explore how those concepts originally gained cultural momentum and acceptance, how they were re-articulated and re-configured in ever-changing new contexts, and how they then became cultural determinants, which not only described a culture, but also shaped all the processes in its formation. The companion offers a close reading of processes of cultural formation and serves as a study guide for students and an instructional guide for teachers of American Studies. The editors have thus decided to supplement the analytical essays with sections focusing on classroom issues and self-study strategies. The study guide section of each essay provides the reader with: I. the various concepts and major themes defined and renegotiated in the historical documents (cf. "I. Key Concepts and Major Themes"), II. information on how various concepts functioned and interacted in ever-changing ideological formations (cf. "II. Comparison – Contrasts – Connections"), III. basic questions every reader should keep in mind when studying the documents (cf. "III. Reading and Discussion Questions"), IV. essential tools for further study (cf. "IV. Resources").

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Gesa Mackenthun: Expansionism (Excerpt)

The term "expansionism" conjures up different critical narratives: first, a description of the process of the territorial expansion of the United States in the 19th century; secondly, a wider description of American imperial attitudes from its inception as a nation until today; and thirdly, a description of the *ideology* that accompanies either of these processes. The present essay will engage all three of these narratives, with an emphasis on the last one. As the section on expansionism in the anthology is limited to documents written between 1789 and 1914, I will make only passing reference to the long prehistory of the concept of westward expansion (cf. Hannemann, Scheiding, Stievmann in this vol.) and concentrate on the 19th century and the documents testifying to continental expansion in North America. However, my account of the particular arguments generated in that period, whether in favor or critical of expansion, will necessarily pay tribute to the significance of expansionism as an ideology that both precedes and survives the specific period covered here – a period whose beginning may be identified with the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 and which is usually thought to have terminated with the "closing" of the frontier in the 1890s. In foregrounding the ideological nature of expansionism, this essay will occasionally make reference to a wider geographical area than the continent of North America, to which some historians still limit the process of expansion.

An investigation of expansionism as an ideology reveals the difficulty of limiting it both temporally and geographically. It also suggests a conceptual affinity between "expansionism" and "imperialism" on the one hand and between "expansionism" and "internal colonialism" on the other. While Hartmut Keil distinguishes between the former two by referring to American expansionism as an "anticipated imperialism" (1991, 69), many scholars of American expansionism agree that the field of investigation should not remain limited to the continent and the process of western settlement but that, as the same ideology was deployed in the hemispheric and transoceanic schemes of the United States, those areas (like Mesoamerica, the Caribbean, and the Pacific) should also be included in a study of expansionism (cf. van Alstyne 1960, 100; Keil 1991, 82-4; Sundquist 2006). The distinction between "ex-

pansionism" and "internal colonialism" is more difficult: It may best be discussed in the context of America's acquisition of the Louisiana territory and the definition of its legal relationship to the indigenous inhabitants of the land to be settled. [...]

Comparison – Contrasts – Connections

Example: Doc. 182 compared to Thomas Cole, "The Course of Empire" (cf. KC web site)

The unit opens with a reading of John L. O'Sullivan's definition of Manifest Destiny (doc. 171) and of Thoreau's description of his instinctual impulse to move west. In his famous statement that it is the "manifest destiny" of Americans "to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions" (KC, 389), O'Sullivan condenses various tropes used for legitimating westward expansion: the trope of God's Providence, the argument of democracy, and the argument of population growth. After tracing the genealogy of these tropes, we continue by applying them to our reading of the lithograph "American Progress" by John Gast (doc. 182).



The dominant theme of this painting is the movement of various groups of people (Indians, settlers, stage coach travelers) and symbols of civilizational progress (railway, telegraph) from east to west. His use of a panoramic and elevated perspective, clearly inspired by the dioramas and panoramas of cities and landscapes exhibited in major American cities, invites a comparison with Turner's use of the map-and-book metaphor. Our reading requires additional investigations into the theme of the westward course of empire, which leads us to documents from earlier

sections, such as George Berkeley's poem "On the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America" (doc. 21), or the poems of the early national poets (Freneau, Dwight, Humphreys, Barlow) who likewise appeal to the symbolism of "ex oriente lux" (docs. 83-4, 89, 107). Students compare the representation of nature in Gast's painting to Thoreau's notion of nature in the excerpt from *Walden* (doc. 160), where Thoreau associates the east with bondage and the west with freedom, where he refers to the Atlantic as a "Lethian stream," and where he remarks on the natural "pull" and beauty of the western landscape, referring to the sunset as the "Great Western Pioneer whom the nations follow" and the "Wildness" as the "preservation of the world" (KC, 369-70). To what extent does Thoreau's vision agree with the light and color imagery of the painting by Gast, and where do they deviate from one another? Another point of discussion may be Thoreau's replacement of Berkeley's "course of empire" with "star of empire": what is the symbolism of a "star" in American political discourse?

The guiding element in Gast's painting is of course the gigantic female figure at the center, with flowing hair, white dress that barely conceals her nudity, with a star on her forehead, a schoolbook under her right arm, and unfolding a telegraph wire with her left hand. The figure – the American national allegory "Lady Columbia" – alludes to other allegorical feminizations of nations and empires, such as Joan of Arc, but at the same time evokes early modern allegorizations of America as a naked female (docs. 28-31). What are the differences between these early modern representations and the one by John Gast?

In a second step, the study unit compares Gast's patriotic representation of American progress with Thomas Cole's famous painting cycle "The Course of Empire" (1833-1836). The cycle consists of five canvases entitled "The Savage State," "The Pastoral or Arcadian State," "The Consummation of Empire," "Destruction," and "Desolation." [...]

Further illustrations and e-Texts

Reproductions of additional illustrations and documents cited in the text, but not printed in the anthology, can be downloaded from the anthology's web site: <http://www.amerikanistik.uni-mainz.de/key>.

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