

Settler-Colonial Structure and Indigenous Agency

Sociological Theory

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Abstract

Settler-colonial theory has become an influential framework in sociology. Yet its central claim—that settler-colonialism is an enduring structure organized by a “logic of elimination”—generates a theoretical paradox. If settler-colonialism is total, how can Indigenous agency be theorized without reproducing the structure it seeks to transcend? I address this tension by bringing sociological theories of structure and agency into dialogue with settler-colonial studies and Indigenous theory. Drawing on William Sewell Jr.’s conception of structure as the coupling of cultural schemas and material resources, I reinterpret two foundational concepts: the logic of elimination and the politics of recognition. Yet Indigenous theorists highlight forms of agency that exceed sociological accounts of action within a shared structural field. I therefore distinguish between interior agency, exercised within settler structures, and exterior agency, which sustains Indigenous worlds beyond them.

Keywords

settler colonialism, structure and agency, Indigenous agency, recognition, decolonial sociology

Introduction

Settler-colonial theory is a scholarly approach that takes the dispossession of Indigenous lands as its starting point (Wolfe 1999) and uses this to analyze contemporary political, social, and cultural formations.¹ To say the concept is having a moment in sociology would be an understatement. Sociologists have drawn on the theory to rethink race and racism (McKay, Vinyeta, and Norgaard 2020), attend to Indigenous-settler relations (Denis 2020), illuminate the historical production of race and gender (Glenn 2015), analyze national tax regimes (Willmott 2022), decode whiteness (Moreton-Robinson 2006), and interrogate the limits of civil society for resolving collective moral problems (Alexander and Horgan 2025; Ray and Jimmie 2025). The value of settler-colonial theory for our discipline is clear, but this intellectual exchange can flow both ways. Sociology’s theoretical toolkit may offer a more dynamic account of structure—one that might enable us to theorize Indigenous agency as a political, emotional, and material force without weakening settler-colonial theory’s critique of ongoing land dispossession.

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Wolfe's (1999) seminal work advances the claim that settler-colonialism organizes every dimension of contemporary life. Settler-colonialism is a form of structured dispossession in which a settler population seizes Indigenous lands to establish its own sovereignties and institutions, naturalizing its control through the elimination, displacement, and assimilation of Indigenous Peoples. Wolfe contends that dispossession is not a historical event, consigned to the past, but a total structure shaping the present. This intervention challenges dominant narratives that treat colonialism as resolved or irrelevant, but its logic produces a paradox. It casts Indigenous agency as a binary between resistance and complicity (Lightfoot 2020; Rowse 2014). As Macoun and Strakosch (2013) argue, in certain formulations, the settler-colonial lens renders Indigenous resistance symbolically potent but materially futile. And as Barker (2011) points out, the theory may uncritically sustain a settler fantasy of omnipotence by portraying settler sovereignty as total and irreversible.

In response, scholars of settler-colonialism have sought to uncover the meaning of agency for both Indigenous Peoples (Barker 2017; Ray and Jimmie 2025; Steinman 2016; Veracini 2014) and settlers (Denis and Bailey 2016; Steinman 2020). Yet the notion of totality in Wolfe's (1999) work generates a theoretical bind: If settler-colonialism is all-encompassing, how can meaningful change—social, cultural, or political—be imagined, let alone enacted, by Indigenous Peoples without reproducing the very structure they seek to transcend?

The tension between structure and agency has long animated sociological theory (Bourdieu [1972] 1977; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Fine 1992; Giddens 1984; Sewell 1992). Although unresolved, the structure-agency debate generated conceptual tools—like Sewell's (1992) articulation of schemas and resources and Giddens's (1984) duality of structure and agency—that allow structure to be thought of as generative rather than deterministic. One enduring insight of the structure-agency debate is that different pictures of social forces are not a problem to be solved but a useful feature of sociological thought, one that enables a continual reframing of how our collective futures are imagined and enacted. Sociology offers conceptual tools to think through the structure-agency debate in settler-colonial theory today.

I reimagine settler-colonial theory by drawing on Sewell's (1992) formulation of structure and agency. Sewell urges us to be explicit in our definitions of structure and agency, arguing that both can be meaningfully thought of as a duality—the amalgam of virtual cultural schemas (models for thinking about the world) and material resources (things that take up time and space). Transposing Sewell's framework into settler-colonial structure sheds new light on influential concepts in settler-colonial theory, like *the logic of elimination* and the *politics of recognition*. Addressing the tension between structure and agency in settler-colonial theory may help to develop a research program of use to theorists and sociologists of race and ethnicity, Indigenous-settler relations, gender, health, nationalism, and social and cultural change.

Despite my contention that his work can help resolve some of the issues in settler-colonial theory, Sewell (1992) is not without his critics and shortcomings. Emirbayer and Mische (1998:1005) have challenged Sewell's model, arguing that he risks reducing agency to a capacity that is “inseparably bound to structural qualities,” extending the same critique to Sewell that some have leveled at Wolfe (1999; Macoun and Strakosch 2013; Rowse 2014). For Emirbayer and Mische, agents engage the world by iterating on past experiences, making practical evaluations in the present, and most importantly, projecting new possibilities into the future.

Indigenous scholars offer a compelling critique of sociological accounts of agency as well, ones that usefully challenge Sewell (1992). Watts (2013) locates agency in what she terms “Place-Thought” or the way the Land (rendered with a capital “L”) possesses both thought (what Sewell might term a “schema”) and agency, or the capacity to act in new and generative ways not defined by or dependent on human agents. This way of conceptualizing Land does not easily map onto the resource-schema duality Sewell expounds so forcefully.

Simpson (2017), a leading Indigenous theorist of resurgence, also articulates a unique view of agency, what she calls *Nishnaabeg Brilliance*. *Nishnaabeg* is a collective noun in Nishnaabemwin that means “the people.” For Simpson, it is more than that: It encompasses ways of thinking and living that are inseparably bound to a deep, reciprocal relationship with the Land. These relations are highly localized and spatially heterogeneous. *Nishnaabeg Brilliance* may be the antidote to the settler omnipotence named by Barker (2011). Simpson models agency as collective, land-based, and relational rather than individual and instrumental. Simpson (2017) and Watts (2013) offer Indigenous ways of conceptualizing agency that critique Sewell’s (1992) theory and his strict resource-schema duality. What can these perspectives offer each other and in turn offer a sociology of settler-colonialism?

Deep engagement with Indigenous thought is central to expanding the terrain of what we as sociologists understand as agency and structure, not only for scholars of settler-colonialism but also for sociologists more generally. Indigenous thought can shift the boundaries of our discipline in new and analytically productive ways. However, this insight is lost if we accept the existing canonization of settler-colonialism instead of working through its multifarious tensions. Demonstrating Indigenous thought’s value for sociology is an expression of Burawoy’s (2021) call to decolonize the canon.

Despite Sewell’s (1992) detractors, limitations, and blind spots, his theory offers much that can be of use to sociologists and Indigenous scholars. His theory of social structures is nimble enough to encourage deeper reflection on the complex and contradictory ways settler-colonialism unfolds, its micro-foundations, and robust enough to stand up to empirical evidence while finding and working through sociological theory’s inherent tensions with Indigenous agency. Emirbayer and Mische (1998), Watts (2013), and Simpson (2017) all agree that theories that center structure or, in the latter case, reduce agency to the actions of human subjects occlude novel forms of action. This is where Indigenous theories of agency offer a coherent alternative that works beyond Sewell to enrich our understanding of the world.

I am not arguing that Sewell (1992) offers a total picture of everything or a perfect antidote to the problems of Wolfe (1999). Such universalizing assertions are precisely the limitation of social thought I am critiquing. What I do argue is that his theory is helpful for understanding the complicated interplay of structure and agency in settler-colonialism while offering the possibility of connecting sociological approaches to Indigenous theory, or at least rooting out sociology’s limitations for understanding forms of agency that are meaningful for Indigenous Peoples.

I distinguish between agency exercised by Indigenous Peoples within the settler-colonial field (*interior agency*), where Sewell (1992) can be usefully applied, and agency that sustains worlds beyond it (*exterior agency*), where Indigenous theory is more useful. My aim is not to reify agency or to argue settler-colonialism is not real, enduring, or difficult to transform. Some scholars have challenged the very category of agency as overly liberal or individualizing, particularly from a relational perspective (Powell 2013) and in postcolonial and feminist thought (Mahmood 2011; Spivak 1988). I want to clarify how agency is made possible under conditions of structural domination.

What Is Settler-Colonialism?

Settler-colonialism is often credited to settler scholar Wolfe (1999). However, Wolfe was not the first to use the idea to analyze a form of colonialism that involved the displacement of an Indigenous population. Sayegh (1965) used “settler-colonialism” to describe Israeli colonization of Palestine. Jabbour (1970), writing in the context of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, also applied the term to European populations settling in Middle Eastern and African territories. Trask (1987, 1999; see also Gonzalves and Kibria 2024), an Indigenous Hawaiian scholar and

activist, theorized U.S. occupation and dispossession in Hawai'i as distinct from other forms of colonialism.

Despite these early and diverse contributions, the origins of the concept are now synonymous with Wolfe. Wolfe's biography is instructive for understanding the foundations of his work. Born in Northern England to an Irish-Catholic family with Jewish roots, Wolfe was educated by Jesuits before enrolling in an undergraduate degree at the University of Melbourne in his mid-20s (Silverstein 2016). During his time at Melbourne, Wolfe was involved in urban Indigenous movements in Australia that shaped his future perspective on settler-colonialism. He earned a master's degree from the London School of Economics (LSE), where he was supervised by Maurice Bloch, and returned to Melbourne to complete his PhD under Dipesh Chakrabarty.

I want to offer an interpretation of Wolfe's biography to help understand his structuralist commitments. No single influence can definitively explain a thinker's entire framework, but tracing Wolfe's intellectual formation through his LSE supervisor, Maurice Bloch, reveals a direct and powerful pathway to his structuralist approach. Bloch is the grandnephew of Emile Durkheim and the second cousin of Marcel Mauss. The interpretation of Durkheim and Mauss available to Bloch, however, was a specific one, heavily filtered through the structural functionalism of British anthropology (Paul 2016) and the ascendant structuralism of Lévi-Strauss ([1950] 1987). This reading prized systemic logic over individual agency, a theoretical lens that Bloch (1983) would adapt for his own Marxist framework.

As a leading Marxist anthropologist, Bloch's work provided Wolfe with a direct line to a structuralist tradition that views history as shaped by overwhelming forces rather than individual actions. Bloch (1983) emphasizes how actors operate within modes of production and social structures they did not choose and often do not fully understand. Exposure to this way of framing history offers a compelling logic for analyzing a phenomenon like settler-colonialism not as a series of choices but as a total system. This viewpoint, channeled through Bloch's mentorship, would become a cornerstone of Wolfe's analysis.

Wolfe's PhD supervisor, Dipesh Chakrabarty, is one of the most influential postcolonial thinkers of the twentieth century (Go 2018) and is celebrated for provincializing Europe in the churn of global history (Kemple and Mawani 2009). Chakrabarty's influence added a postcolonial dimension to Wolfe's structuralist toolkit. Impressed upon by an intellectual network of formidable mentors and ideas, Wolfe possessed the cultural capital necessary to create an about face in global knowledge. As Collins (1998) argues, such networks are central to the production of transformative ideas. Wolfe's seminal theorization of settler-colonialism was enabled by these interactions.

Rather than taking settler-colonial nations as his starting point, Wolfe describes his work as a critique of anthropology. For Wolfe (1999:3), anthropology contained the conditions and justifications for colonizing Indigenous Peoples: Anthropology "is analysed here, in a manner adapted from Marcel Mauss," as "a total discursive practice . . . one that encodes and reproduces the hegemonic process of colonial settlement." By starting with anthropology, Wolfe sought to uncover settler-colonialism's purchase across society.

Many of the conceptual issues with agency in settler-colonial theory today, I argue, can be traced to Wolfe's adoption of Bloch's structuralism and his inherited structural interpretation from Durkheim and Mauss. In his most famous essay, Mauss ([1925] 2002:101) interpreted "the gift"—exchanged between tribal groups—as "a total social fact," a phenomenon that was at "once legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, morphological, etc." For Wolfe, settler-colonialism functioned as a total social fact—implicitly structuring every aspect of global society, shaping the lives of the colonized and the colonizer.

Connections to Durkheim are also present in Wolfe's oeuvre. The title of Wolfe's 2016 book, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race*, echoes Durkheim's ([1912] 1995) *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, and the connection is more than coincidence. In *Traces*, Wolfe (2016:5) writes, "just as, for Durkheim, religion was society speaking, so, I shall argue, race is colonialism

speaking, in idioms whose diversity reflects the variety of unequal relationships into which Europeans have co-opted conquered populations.” Located within the structural origins of Wolfe’s thought—inherited from Durkheim, Bloch, and Mauss—are our present difficulties for theorizing agency. If settler-colonialism’s structure is total, then how can we account for heterogeneity or resistance?

Settler-Colonial Structure

Wolfe (1999) argues that anthropology had been obsessed with taxonomizing Indigenous difference. While conceding that Indigenous Peoples and settlers are different, Wolfe does not want to write another ethnography of Indigenous difference as he sees these contributing to the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples. Instead, he wants to interpret and understand the conditions that produce a discourse of Indigenous difference in anthropology.

Wolfe’s analytic move mirrors Spivak’s (1988) “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Instead of trying to diagnose or understand the subjects of colonization, the other, or the subaltern, Spivak argues we should interrogate the conditions of abjection that make them subaltern and allow another group to communicate their meaning. These conditions deprive the subaltern of access to the means of communication, rendering them silent or making their voices unintelligible. Wolfe’s (1999) focus on the structural conditions producing Indigenous difference in anthropology echoes this intellectual move, revealing the influence of Chakrabarty’s postcolonial thought on his work. At the intersection of postcolonial theory and the history of anthropology, Wolfe “discovers” settler-colonialism. His critique reveals how anthropology encodes the processes of colonial settlement and invites us to confront the structures that sustain settler-colonialism, but also the way systems of knowledge, like anthropology, reflect rather than resist these structures.

Wolfe’s (1999) book is shocking for the conceptual blindness his “discovery” unearths and riveting for the new history of anthropology he maps with settler-colonialism as his lodestone. Drawing from Fanon ([1961] 1967), Wolfe differentiates settler-colonialism from colonialism. Whereas colonial formations were predicated on the extraction of surplus value from a foreign population, settler-colonialism involves the occupation and settlement of Indigenous lands, making settler colonies immune from the withdrawal of Indigenous labor in ways different from nonsettler colonies like those in Asia, Africa, or the Indian subcontinent. According to Wolfe (1999:7), a defining feature of settler-colonialism is that “the colonizers come to stay,” marked by their arrival and growth in number and power. For Wolfe, anthropologists have taken on a leading role in settler-colonialism’s ideological production by speaking for Indigenous Peoples.

Wolfe’s (1999) intervention is interesting on several counts. He resists commenting on Indigenous difference beyond acknowledging it. This strategy allows Wolfe to avoid the pitfalls he identifies in anthropology: that its portrayals of Indigenous Peoples have historically served to legitimize settler-colonial rule. Wolfe argues that anthropology produces discourses that allow for Indigenous existence and difference to be reconciled with the acquisition of Indigenous lands by settlers and to erase Indigenous claims to those lands. Settler nations are constituted on a belief that Indigenous Peoples have no claim to their territory because their societies were inferior to Europeans. A position, Wolfe argues, anthropologists have enabled rather than challenged by taxonomizing “primitive” Indigenous cultures.

Wolfe (1999) inaugurated settler-colonial studies as a field separate from postcolonial theory and Indigenous Studies. Settler-colonial studies interpret Indigenous dispossession as different from colonialism but no less central to global history. Despite its limitations for understanding agency, settler-colonialism has been an incredibly productive and innovative concept. As an intellectual movement, settler-colonial theory became influential across several disciplines, first in history (Veracini 2010, 2014; Veracini and Cavanagh 2017) and most recently in sociology.

Wolfe's *Weltanschauung*

Settler-colonial theory can be thought of as what Go (2018) calls a *Weltanschauung*, or a totalizing worldview—one that interprets social relations through the expropriation of Indigenous lands and the justifications for their dispossession and elimination (Wolfe 2006). This orientation gave Wolfe's (1999) intervention its analytic force but also its conceptual blind spots. As the theory has migrated across disciplines, scholars have been compelled to devise increasingly elaborate accounts of settler-colonial variation and Indigenous resistance—efforts that reflect the limits of a framework built on structural totality. I propose an alternative grounded in sociological theories of structure that center contingency, contradiction, and heterogeneity. However, there are also limitations to sociological accounts, and this is where Indigenous theories of agency that center Land, refusal, and resurgence help us paint a more complex picture of settler-colonialism.

Drawing on Wolfe's *Weltanschauung* and Martinican scholar Fanon ([1952] 1967) and revising Marx, Dene scholar Coulthard (2014) argues that Indigenous-settler relations are no longer primarily defined by efforts to eliminate or assimilate Indigenous Peoples but have shifted to encompass what he terms *the politics of recognition*. Coulthard cautions that recognition of Indigenous Peoples, cultures, and Nations always occurs within asymmetrical relations of power, what he calls a "settler-colonial relation," and because of this, recognition gives outsized power to settlers to determine not only the worth of Indigenous Peoples but also the shape, form, and substance of Indigenous identity, territorial claims, and societal membership.

Through acts of recognition, settler states have the power to decide who Indigenous Peoples are and what aspects of their peoplehood are permissible and acknowledged, reproducing the very dynamics of subordination and dispossession the politics of recognition promises to transcend. Coulthard (2014) calls on Indigenous peoples and communities to reject the one-sided politics of recognition in favor of self-recognition and community empowerment. Here, the legacy of Wolfe's (1999) thought can be felt most forcefully, with an Indigenous scholar taking up his concepts to articulate the contemporary conditions of Indigenous life and pathways toward Indigenous survival and resurgence. Coulthard's work is profoundly about Indigenous agency and resurgence. However, Coulthard's analysis treats recognition as a dominant political-philosophical orientation rather than tracing how it became institutionalized within colonial bureaucracies (see Coburn 2016). As a result, the mechanisms through which recognition comes to pattern Indigenous-settler-state relations remain underspecified. My intervention builds on Coulthard's insights by offering a more explicit account of these processes.

Whereas Coulthard (2014) writes principally about Canada, sociologist Glenn (2015) draws on Wolfe (1999, 2006) and Veracini (2010) to rethink gender and race relations in the United States. She argues that U.S. settler-colonialism is a race-gender project that normalizes whiteness and masculinity—a project that begins with the theft and commodification of Indigenous lands. For Glenn (2015), settler-colonialism is a total structure that underwrites nearly every aspect of contemporary life in the United States. Like so many interventions into settler-colonial theory, the concept allows Glenn to make significant contributions to sociology. For Glenn (2015), the dispossession and control of Indigenous lands empowered white men to construct a gender and racial hierarchy that placed them at its pinnacle and continues to pattern contemporary race and gender relations in the United States. Glenn demonstrates how white agency in the United States is fundamentally linked to land dispossession. While Glenn powerfully examines settler dominance, she leaves unaddressed the persistence of Indigenous knowledges, resistance, and gender relations.

Building on Glenn's (2015) work, Indigenous scholar Dwanna L. McKay and settler scholars Kirsten Vinyeta and Kari Marie Norgaard (2020) interpret contemporary U.S. life as rooted in settler-colonialism. Drawing on the structuralist perspective first articulated by Wolfe (1999) and reiterated by Glenn (2015), they write "settler colonialism must be conceptualized as an ongoing social structure that shapes every dimension of contemporary life and that morphs over time to

continuously privilege the settler” (McKay et al. 2020:3). For McKay and her coauthors, land has been central to the process of racialization, particularly the racialization of Blacks in the United States. Drawing on Glenn (2015), they write “stolen land is the literal ground upon which ‘stolen people’ occupied the dehumanizing position of property under the regime of chattel slavery” (McKay et al. 2020:5). The theft and commodification of Indigenous lands is a prerequisite for the commodification of human bodies. McKay and colleagues offer compelling examples of Indigenous resistance and decolonization, what they call “enduring Indigeneity.” Their work aligns with the critique of settler-colonialism by Cherokee scholar Fenelon (2016a), that by subsuming all Indigenous-settler relations under the category of settler-colonialism, scholars erase the complex social relations between Indigenous Peoples and settlers.

Scholars like McKay et al. (2020) provide compelling examples of Indigenous resistance, but their analysis could be strengthened by a more explicit theoretical framing of agency and defining what they mean when they use the word “structure”—a framing and definition this article seeks to provide. Their work rests on cases and examples but does not create a theory of agency within settler-colonial domination. Moreover, despite their invocation of Fenelon’s (2016a) critique, McKay et al. (2020) do not challenge the idea of settler-colonialism as a total structure. Crafting a theory of agency within settler-colonial structure would allow for sociology to map Indigenous agency more fully, as well as the complex and contested relationships that facilitated land dispossession. Such a theory would also help us get at the reasons why Indigenous-settler relations are so variegated and theorize settler-colonialism’s pernicious involvement in contemporary formations of race and gender.

Fenelon (2016a) takes a step in this direction, proposing to think through the different phases of settler-colonialism—conquest, colonization, capitalism, and hegemonic global capitalism. Fenelon (2016b) argues that theorizing the capitalist world-system helps us fully attend to the elimination of Indigenous Peoples in our present racial formation. Fenelon adds depth to the structural picture of settler-colonialism. However, despite the scale of his examination, concepts of agency and structure remain unspecified.

The clearest articulation of the structure-agency debate in settler-colonial studies comes from an exchange between Australian historians Rowse (2014) and Veracini (2014). Rowse (2014) contends that because of settler-colonial theory’s “narrative of elimination,” scholars working within its conceptual ambit have difficulty reconciling its totalizing force with Indigenous agency. He notes that settler-colonialism centers elimination but also insists on ongoing Indigenous presence, two contradictory claims that leave limited space for uncovering Indigenous agency. Rowse critiques the idea that Indigenous Peoples’ choices can be reduced to a binary of resistance versus assimilation as this binary fails to capture the complexity of Indigenous strategies, which often blend resistance with pragmatic engagement with colonial systems. For Rowse, the structuralist perspective of settler-colonial theory overly determines Indigenous agency.

In response to Rowse (2014), Veracini (2014) defends the structuralist approach, which he sees as essential for understanding the ongoing, systematic nature of settler-colonial domination. He answers Rowse’s (2014) concerns by acknowledging that settler-colonial studies can risk underestimating Indigenous agency, but he maintains that scholarly focus must remain on understanding the structural nature of settler-colonialism. Veracini’s critique emerges from his broader theoretical framework, which, like Wolfe’s (1999), emphasizes the structural nature of settler-colonialism. His main concern with Rowse’s approach to Indigenous heterogeneity is that it can downplay the central, ongoing nature of settler-colonial power. Veracini (2014), like Wolfe (1999, 2006), sees settler-colonialism as a distinct, enduring structure that seeks to eliminate or replace Indigenous populations through various means, including violence, assimilation, and erasure. Is it possible to conceptualize Indigenous agency while maintaining allegiance to the total structural picture of settler-colonialism?

The dispute between more agency-focused accounts of Indigenous resistance and settler allyship (Lightfoot 2020; Macoun and Strakosch 2013; Rowse 2014; Steinman 2012, 2020) and more structural accounts of settler-colonialism (Coulthard 2014; Fenelon 2016a, 2016b; Glenn 2015; McKay et al. 2020; Veracini 2010, 2014; Wolfe 1999) has left Indigenous agency undertheorized. At best, this will make Indigenous agency the subject of greater attention as scholars work to demonstrate the heterogeneity Rowse (2014) and others have noted. At worst, the absence of a robust framework could lead to scholarship that either ignores Indigenous agency entirely or treats it in a superficial, tokenistic manner, thereby reproducing the very colonial logics the field looks to critique.

I argue this is more than a semantic dispute (Abend 2008) and has deep material consequences for how Indigenous Peoples' struggles and sovereignties are understood and supported or silenced and occluded. Scholars need to offer more precise definitions of core concepts like "structure" and "agency." Both sides require more nuance, not only to specify what they mean by structure and agency but also to critically examine the assumptions underpinning these concepts: both in the settler-colonial theory inherited from Wolfe (1999) and in the contexts in which settler-colonialism continues to operate. As decolonial sociology builds momentum, we should not accept concepts uncritically but pause and think through the complexity and baggage these concepts bring to our discipline.

The debate between Rowse (2014) and Veracini (2014) is rooted in the uniquely structuralist perspective Wolfe adapted from Durkheim, Bloch, and Mauss. This debate is not unlike the theoretical battles waged in sociology throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Bourdieu [1972] 1977; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Fine 1992; Giddens 1984; Sewell 1992), which can provide profound lessons useful to settler-colonial theory today. By specifying what we mean when we use words like "settler-colonial structure" or "Indigenous agency," we get a more fulsome picture of both domination and Indigenous resistance and create a better theory of settler-colonialism. To do this, let us step back and consider the structure-agency debate in sociology and the lessons we can draw from it.

How Does Sociology Theorize Structure-Agency?

The structure-agency debate is one of the most enduring conflicts in sociology (Fuchs 2001), and it is mirrored in settler-colonial theory today. The early European architects of social theory, Marx and Durkheim, emphasized structure, a focus later extended by American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1937). In contrast, American pragmatists and symbolic interactionists, like Mead (1934) and Herbert Blumer (1969), emphasized agency. What perspectives are available to us to reconceptualize this debate?

For Marx ([1867] 1967), the organization and control of the means of production by the bourgeoisie created the conditions for culture and ideology, normalizing a relationship of subordination where the working class sells their labor to the bourgeoisie for wages worth less than its value. The bourgeoisie accumulate and invest this surplus as capital, not only gaining control over the economy but also achieving political and cultural domination. For Marx, the working classes had the capacity to become conscious of their own subordination; through collective action and superior numbers, they could supplant bourgeois dominance and become the agent of history. Settler-colonial scholars have drawn on and critiqued Marxist ideas. Coulthard (2014), for example, critiques Marx's teleological vision of social and cultural change and his silence on Indigenous societies. Marx viewed Indigenous Peoples as future members of the proletariat, who through modernization would enter the working class and meaningfully take part in human agency. This perspective, however, as Coulthard notes, does not align with many of the strategies

of resistance currently undertaken by Indigenous communities, leaving them outside most Marxist frameworks.

Durkheim was more structurally focused than even Marx, yet he turned significant attention on Indigenous societies. Durkheim argued that human behaviors like deviance (Durkheim [1893] 1997), suicide (Durkheim [1897] 1951), and religious practice (Durkheim [1912] 1995) had their origins in external, collective forces. For Durkheim, social forces were the agents of history. In *The Elementary Forms*, Durkheim ([1912] 1995) deploys Indigenous societies to make sense of what he posits is a universal human condition—the way societies come to apprehend concepts and map and label their reality collectively. He then uses this insight from Indigenous societies to critique the rise of what he calls “the cult of the individual” in European societies. Durkheim’s influence is felt most forcefully, though often tacitly, through Wolfe (1999), and it is from Wolfe that we encounter the structuralist challenges in settler-colonial theory today.

Bourdieu ([1980] 1990) contributes to this debate by reconciling individual agency, our choices and actions, with social structure by synthesizing Marx and Durkheim. Through his concepts of habitus, field, and capital, Bourdieu demonstrates how individual behaviors are shaped by social structure without being determined by them. “Habitus” refers to the bodily dispositions and mental pictures of the world that agents acquire from structure. For Bourdieu, habitus is stratified, possessed by agents differentially owing to factors like class and gender. However, the transcription of habitus onto subjects is never complete. Owing to this incomplete transcription, agents can improvise and rework these dispositions to compete with other agents in what Bourdieu terms a “field”—an arena of struggle. Lamont (1992) critiques Bourdieu, arguing that he portrays individuals as overly constrained by structure. King (2000) proposes that Bourdieu never fully resolves the tension between structure and agency, noting that the flexibility attributed to habitus might not fully capture moments of genuine autonomy and transformation. Bourdieu has been productively applied in sociology’s ongoing engagement with postcolonial theory and colonialism to map the colonial field (Steinmetz 2025). Despite this, Bourdieu’s work remains mostly unread by scholars of settler-colonialism today.

Another contribution to the structure-agency debate comes from English sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984). Giddens reconciles the earlier generation of sociologists, like Marx and Durkheim, with more agency-oriented theorists, like symbolic interactionists and phenomenologists. For Giddens, social structures do not merely shape human behavior, they are also the outcome of human behavior, continually reproduced and modified through knowledgeable human action. This leads Giddens to develop his concept of the duality of structure, one of the most influential ideas to arise from this debate. Structures are dual, for Giddens, because they both enable and constrain action. Rather than conceptual opposites, structure and agency predispose one another. They are two sides of the same coin.

Giddens’s (1984) theory has resonated in many corners of sociology but has had minimal impact on settler-colonial theory. Sewell (1992:4) writes that Giddens’s “conception of human agents as ‘knowledgeable’ and ‘enabled’ implies that those agents” can put “their structurally formed capacities to work in creative or innovative ways....[For Giddens] if enough people...who are powerful enough act in innovative ways, their actions may have consequences of transforming the very structures that gave them the capacity to act.” Despite acknowledging Giddens’s innovation, Sewell critiques him for never satisfactorily defining structure.

Building on the work of Giddens (1984) and Bourdieu ([1980] 1990), Sewell (1992) examines the semantic problem sociologists have with the word “structure.” Sociologists use the term constantly but have a tough time defining it, resting on its implicit meaning. Sewell lauds Giddens for his innovative notion of the duality of structure and agency, but he suggests that Giddens’s definition of structure as rules and resources leaves much to be desired. Instead, Sewell defines structure as the amalgam of *actual resources* and *virtual cultural schemas*. Resources are actual because

they occupy time and space: They include material goods, social institutions, clock time, human labor, skilled human agents, militaries, factories, and capital (to name but a few). Cultural schemas are virtual because they reside as residues of consciousness in our mind, yet like *habitus* are the result of structure's effect on agents. Schemas are frameworks for thinking about the organization and function of the world that can be generalized and transposed to different situations: They are mental images, models, or pictures of how the world works. The linking of cultural schemas to new or existing resources forms a structure, and through structures, agents achieve ends. For Sewell, agents use their mental images to direct resources to achieve an outcome, although not always under conditions they choose or understand. Sewell embraces the duality of structure. Schemas and resources are both enabling and constraining, both agency and structure.

For Sewell (1992), agency is the ability to couple a cultural schema to resources. Going deeper, Sewell (1992:20) offers that resources are the effect of schemas and schemas are the effect of resources:

[S]chemas not empowered or regenerated by resources would eventually be abandoned and forgot, just as resources without cultural schemas to direct their use would eventually dissipate and decay. . . . [S]ets of schemas and resources may properly be said to constitute structures only when they mutually imply and sustain each other over time.

For Sewell (1992:20), we should think of humans' use of resources as akin to their use of language, "they are culturally and historically determined," and while our ability to exercise agency is constrained and varies "in the extent of" our "control of social relations . . . all members of society exercise some measure of agency in the conduct of their daily lives." Sewell locates both structure and agency at the juncture of cultural schemas and resources, avoiding the twin traps of labeling humans as structural dupes or seeing their actions as solely the result of individual choice, drive, and determination.

By using the definition of structure offered by Sewell (1992), as the amalgam of resources and cultural schemas, we get at a more fulsome picture of what we mean when we use the word "structure" in settler-colonial theory. Settler-colonialism is a structure—cultural schemas (sovereignty, property, race) coupled to resources (law, bureaucracy, capital). These cultural schemas, far from being total, change across time and space. People today in Canada think very differently about the theft of land from Indigenous Peoples than they might have 100 years ago in Australia. The resources for accomplishing the theft of Indigenous lands change, too. Resources like social institutions—the Residential School system in Canada or the Indian Boarding Schools in the United States—dissipated, transformed, and were replaced. *Agency* too is the practical coupling of schemas to resources. To understand the structure of settler-colonialism, we should direct our attention to the coupling and uncoupling of cultural schemas and resources.

Sewell (1992) helps us get at the structural aspect of settler-colonialism, but it is less certain he provides the necessary insights to locate and understand Indigenous agency beyond the settler-colonial field. Sociologists often view Indigenous agency as inseparable from settler-colonialism, but the way Indigenous Peoples have responded to settler-colonialism does not always fit neatly into Sewell's schema-resource framework. Moreover, these accounts may fail to give credence to the continuity of lifeways of Indigenous Peoples that exceed settler-colonial domination. Namely, Indigenous theorists emphasize the Land in a radically different way from Sewell.

Sewell (1992) would locate the "Land" as a resource in the resource-schema duality. Yet for Indigenous scholars like Simpson (2017), Watts (2013), and Jeannette Armstrong (1998), the Land itself is an agent: The Land is a thinking being and the source of thought and language. This is not a social construction, but a real material relation that shapes Indigenous capacity for action. Indigenous theorists thus push back in important and generative ways on the human-centric accounts of agency that have so dominated sociology.

The Structure of Settler-Colonialism

Now that we have a better idea of what structure “means,” I want to apply it to two of the most influential ideas in settler-colonial theory today—the *logic of elimination* and *recognition*. Transposing Sewell’s (1992) concept of structure into Wolfe’s (1999) logic allows us to see the mechanism through which heterogeneous cultural schemas and resources can produce such a uniform outcome—the seizure of Indigenous lands. Sewell’s framework offers a way to specify the micro-foundations of Wolfe’s logic of elimination (see Collins 1981). Similarly, in the language of Sewell, recognition is a way the settler states deal with the cultural schemas of Indigenous Peoples, empowering some by coupling them with resources while disempowering others by uncoupling them from resources.

The Micro-foundations of Elimination

For Wolfe (1999:27), settler-colonial countries and the empires that preceded them were and are predicated on the elimination of Indigenous Peoples: “[I]n its purest form . . . the logic of elimination strives to replace Indigenous society with that imported by the colonizers.” Wolfe (2006:402) argues that the logic of elimination is “premised on securing—obtaining and maintaining—control of territory,” and it “requires the elimination of the owners of that territory, but not in any particular way.” Indigenous Peoples may be killed, forcibly relocated, or assimilated, a typology of phases Wolfe (1999:27) deploys as “a heuristic which is enabled by the general pattern” to understand the logic of elimination.

It is precisely this pattern I am concerned with. I am not arguing that elimination is not real, or that settlers did not covet Indigenous territory, but that the elements making up the acquisition of Indigenous lands were and are heterogeneous, something Wolfe (1999) himself acknowledges. What Wolfe offers is a powerful analytic thrust, that regardless of intentions or means, elimination persists. What Wolfe does not accomplish is to identify the *how* of this enduring pattern—a *how* that can help us understand the heterogeneity that is key to many forms of Indigenous agency today.

Part of this shortcoming stems from Wolfe’s (1999) failure to define what he means by “logic.” At one point, Wolfe (1999:2) writes, “settler colonies were (are) premised on the elimination of native societies . . . the colonizers come to stay—invasion is a structure not an event.” Later in the same work, Wolfe (1999:167) writes, “thus the logic of elimination is not some extra-historical teleology, unfolding independently of human practice . . . it is however a force that cannot be reduced to [settler] motives . . . this alone is not enough to account for the logic of elimination.” These two ideas are in tension. Wolfe (1999:178) forcefully rejects determinism yet consigns causal power to an extra-human force, what he calls a “total social process,” channeling Mauss ([1925] 2002). Yet Wolfe (1999:214) also says settler-colonialism is not fate, destiny, or a script but a “total context of inscription” that does not happen independent of human practice. How can these two claims coexist? Here, Wolfe opens a productive analytic puzzle. Motives matter, but they do not explain the pattern, because even if individuals or their intentions change, the pattern persists. What Wolfe urges us to consider is the system that produces these motives.

An overriding critique of those who challenge the logic of elimination conceptually is that events were never so neat as Wolfe (1999) asserts (Rowse 2014). If one part of the difficulty is that we do not know precisely what Wolfe means by the logic of elimination, then another is his invocation of Mauss ([1925] 2002). Wolfe (1999:3) describes his method as adapted from Mauss, directed at analyzing the “total social phenomena” of “colonial settlement” by studying anthropology as “a total discursive practice.”

For Mauss ([1925] 2002), total social facts explain everything. They are unconscious principles that govern action. Yet as Bourdieu ([1980] 1990:98) and Lévi-Strauss ([1950] 1987) point

out, a total social fact explains nothing specifically, reducing “agents to the status of automata or inert bodies moved by obscure mechanisms towards ends of which they are unaware.” For Bourdieu ([1980] 1990:99), total social facts cannot explain behavior because “even when the agents’ dispositions are as perfectly harmonized as possible and when the sequence of actions and reactions seem entirely predictable from outside, uncertainty remains as to the outcome of the interaction until the whole sequence is completed.” Wolfe (1999) is saying that the persistence of the pattern of elimination is the explanation for the pattern. Useful rhetorically but difficult to parse analytically.

Both Indigenous and settler agents sometimes thought about the world differently and in noneliminationist terms. Bourdieu ([1980] 1990:99) writes, “the simple possibility that things might proceed otherwise than as laid down by the mechanical laws . . . is sufficient to change the whole experience of practice and, by the same token, its logic.” Bourdieu is writing about exchange, but the same uncertainty is present, unacknowledged by Wolfe (1999), in the logic of elimination. Rowse (2014) calls this “complexity heterogeneity.” Exploring legal disputes and Indian law, Biolsi (2007) calls it “indeterminacy.” Social movements (Steinman 2012), complex Indigenous-settler family relations, and legal cases and government policies abated assimilation and dispossession (Biolsi 2007). Were these all an expression of elimination, agents acting to eliminate Indigenous Peoples, impelled by an unconscious logic? Or were they complex interactions of cultural schemas and resources, some conscious and some less so, some supporting elimination and some strongly resisting it? The latter, I argue, is a more convincing explanation than the idea that settler actions are shaped solely by unconscious principles. The persistence of elimination is better explained by considering the dynamics of changing cultural schemas and resource configurations as they unfold across time and space than by positing it is a total social process or a total context of inscription.

On the opposite side, scholars very much want to hold onto the key insight of Wolfe (1999), that the logic of elimination continues to pattern social relations and institutions even where this is unexpected or where altruistic motives seem primary (Veracini 2014). Wolfe’s logic remains a powerful description, a pattern, a structural tendency, but it does not explain or specify how this logic becomes institutionally effective, how change happens, how it interacts with other domains, why it sometimes intensifies and is sometimes curtailed. Wolfe names the overriding tendency of settler-colonialism but not its mechanism.

Sewell’s (1992) account of structure adds to Wolfe’s (1999) views by specifying why the tenets of settler-colonialism become so pernicious, deeply ingrained, and widespread, surviving under radically different resource configurations, ideologies, and motivations. From Sewell’s vantage, the logic of elimination is not just an orientation or a tendency: It becomes effective only when schemas (e.g., land as property, civilization, protection, assimilation) are coupled with resources (e.g., military force, law, bureaucracy, schools, property regimes, environmental destruction, disease). Sewell’s theory explains why the same structural tendency can be realized through different institutional forms across historical contexts—different resources are available at different times, schemas shift in dominance, configurations of resources and schemas change. Sewell’s account of structure specifies under what conditions elimination becomes effective and provides the mechanism by which it becomes historically variable and institutionalized, but also how it regenerates constellations of resources and schemas. Sewell’s perspective does not treat schemas as independent causes but as effective only insofar as they are able to mobilize specific resources. The logic of elimination is not an autonomous force or a total social fact. It is the historically specific couplings of cultural schemas and material resources that shape the form, intensity, and reach of settler-colonial practice in complex and sometimes contradictory ways.

An example helps illustrate the mechanism. In the United States, Indian Removal confined Indigenous Peoples to designated areas, usually unproductive land, separate from settlers and

limiting Indigenous autonomy and access to traditional resources (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014). The most well-known example in the United States was the Trail of Tears, the forced migration of the Cherokee People following the Indian Removal Act of 1830. The Trail of Tears can be seen as a transitional moment in the logic of elimination, where violent displacement paved the way for carceral containment in newly established territories. Indigenous Peoples and relations went from the exterior to the interior of the state, rendering them wards of a purportedly superior civilization in lands not yet organized as States. Remarking on the Cherokee removal, de Tocqueville ([1835] 2006: chapter 18) writes, “It is impossible to conceive the extent of the sufferings which attend these forced emigrations. They are undertaken by a people already exhausted and reduced.” De Tocqueville’s description of the removal and displacement of the Cherokee speaks to the logic of elimination, but the underlying mechanism was more complicated than merely a total social process inscribed on Indigenous and settler agents.

Prior to the Trail of Tears, the Cherokee demonstrated remarkable political adaptability and historical agency, establishing a formal system of self-government and forming the basis of a claim to sovereignty. In 1827, the Cherokee adopted a written constitution modeled on the United States, establishing a tripartite government with executive, legislative, and judicial branches (Perdue 1998; Wilkins 1989). Prior to this, they developed literacy and a written language; inculcated themselves in Christianity; developed a free, bilingual, and open press; developed commercial farming, ranching, and trade networks; purchased slaves and participated in the slave economy; and established permanent towns and settlements. At the same time, they solidified their traditional relations with the land and the organization of their family systems, and they maintained many elements of their language, culture, and governance systems. They adapted sufficiently to settler society to achieve power while maintaining aspects of their Indigeneity.

The Cherokee did precisely what Indigenous Peoples were thought incapable of: They transformed the land into a productive economic system and met the conditions set by settlers for sovereignty. And yet, paradoxically, their agency—the weaving together of settler and Indigenous schemas and coupling them to resources—increased settler desire for their elimination, rendering them a threat and their lands productive and desirable. By the 1830s, U.S. President Andrew Jackson, empowered by the Indian Removal Act (1830), which passed with only a slim majority in Congress, conspired with the Georgia state government to remove the Cherokee.

The Cherokee fought several legal cases, including *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832), challenging the decision to relocate them. The Supreme Court sided with the Cherokee, and Chief Justice Marshall recognized the Cherokee as a distinct, independent political community with the right to govern their own people and land (Biolsi 2007; *Worcester* 1832). The United States was treaty-bound to protect the Cherokee from state intrusion. President Jackson and Georgia’s government ignored the ruling. Jackson refused to honor the Chief Justice’s mandate to protect the Cherokee, leading to the Cherokee’s forceable displacement from Georgia. Here, we have heterogenous and competing cultural schemas, not a total structure.

The Trail of Tears, led by the U.S. military, caused thousands of deaths and vacated Cherokee territory. Had the Supreme Court’s cultural schema of Cherokee sovereignty been coupled to resources and not the eliminationist schema expounded by Jackson, things might well have been different. This is the uncertainty Bourdieu ([1980] 1990) identifies in his critique of Mauss ([1952] 2002). Sewell (1992) allows us to map this complex pattern. Elimination becomes effective when schemas are coupled with specific resources (military, law, property regimes), but this does not mean other cultural schemas were not operational and that other alternatives were not possible.

And yet, we find the structural pattern predicted by Wolfe (1999). The Cherokee were displaced from their lands. However, the story is more heterogenous and indeterminate, with varied cultural schemas and resource configurations coexisting. The Supreme Court upheld Cherokee sovereignty, but because the resources to execute legal orders are controlled by the executive

branch, Jackson was able to connect the military to his own eliminationist schema, denying resources to competing schemas.

Cherokee removal was not the result of a single decision but a coordinated realignment of federal and state power in which executive authority, legislative authorization, and treaty manipulation combined to override Indigenous sovereignty once legal containment failed. This deployment of resources powerfully regenerated the eliminationist schema, which continued to structure Indian–U.S. relations well into the twentieth century. The significance of the case resonates today, with Indigenous Nations using it as both a schema and a resource to claim sovereignty and resist being cast as racial minorities (Steinman 2016). By focusing on how resources are deployed according to changing cultural schemas and how cultural schemas are regenerated by or realized through resources, Sewell's (1992) model provides a better framework for theorizing how elimination evolves without altering the underlying premise—to clear the land for settlers and erase Indigenous presence.

While the Cherokee case illustrates a violent realignment of state power to override a legal decision, the history of the Canadian fur trade demonstrates how elimination can remain latent within a radically different configuration of schemas and resources. As Innis ([1930] 1999) writes in *The Fur Trade in Canada*, the relationship between the Hudson's Bay Company and Indigenous Peoples was key to development of the extensive and highly profitable trade in animal furs, particularly beaver furs to make felt hats. The fur trade was initially defined by a schema of mutual dependence: The colonial economy in Canada was built on Indigenous expertise and labor to extract furs from an extensive periphery. In this context, elimination was suspended because the resource of the land was valued for its pelt-bearing fauna, rather than its soil, and pelts required Indigenous labor.

Once the economic schema shifted from mercantilism to agrarianism, the British Empire decoupled its resources—specifically, law, treaty-making, and the railway—from the fur trade and recoupled them to territorial acquisition and settlement. This shift led to persistent conflict, like the Metis Rebellion and the arrogation of lands formally recognized as Indigenous by The Royal Proclamation of 1763. The persistent pattern of elimination survived because it could pivot from the inclusive exploitation of the fur trade to exclusive dispossession as soon as the material value of the land changed.

In both cases, there was never a single cultural schema or single set of resources but many competing, spatially heterogeneous schemas and resources. In the case of the fur trade, cultural schemas in England among the Foreign Office or the Hudson's Bay Company's top officials differed from those of settlers in the periphery seeking to acquire Indian land. In the United States, the Supreme Court's schemas differed from Georgia's political elite and from Jackson himself. We also see temporal heterogeneity. In Canada, it took over a century for territorial acquisition to displace fur trade cooperation as the dominant schema. In the United States, even though the Cherokee were displaced, because of their pioneering legal victory, many Indigenous Nations are recognized as sovereign today.

One configuration of schemas and resources may win, but others are often operational, overriding and sometimes limiting elimination. These structures may interact with the cultural schemas of Indigenous Peoples in unique, generative, and uncertain or indeterminate ways, sometimes realized centuries later. By focusing on the underlying mechanism, we get a better picture of the complexity of territorial acquisition. However, I want to emphasize the materiality of elimination and keep from overstating its cultural component. Elimination is not primarily an ideological force but a material one. At its core, elimination is about land. This material basis must not be lost in an analysis that emphasizes changing cultural schemas.

The Structure of Recognition

Like Wolfe (1999), Coulthard (2014) uses the structure of settler-colonialism to interrogate mutations in Indigenous-settler-state relations. According to Coulthard (2014:3) *the politics of recognition* are an “expansive range of recognition-based models of liberal pluralism that seek to ‘reconcile’ Indigenous assertions of nationhood with settler-state sovereignty via accommodation of Indigenous identity.” Coulthard provides a powerful indictment of the politics of recognition. However, there is space to theorize the underlying mechanism of recognition and how it functions as a social process to disempower Indigenous Peoples.

Refracted through Sewell (1992), recognition operates by empowering or disempowering certain cultural schemas by coupling or uncoupling them from resources. As the settler-state expands its influence over Indigenous communities, it selectively legitimizes certain Indigenous perspectives over others. If a cultural schema affirms the state’s authority or frames land as a commodity, it is empowered through access to resources; if a schema challenges the state’s authority or frames land as a set of relations, it is disempowered and harshly curtailed.

An example of recognition in Canada is found in self-government agreements. These agreements emerged in the wake of Canada’s constitutional debates in the 1980s. Ultimately, self-governing authority was granted only to bands that recognized Canadian sovereignty (Ray and Jimmie 2025). If a community entered into a self-government agreement and recognized the sovereignty of the state, they were granted powers such as taxation and the ability to borrow money. This recognition allowed Indigenous governments to generate revenue from businesses operating on their lands through collecting taxes and housing development—critical for impoverished communities seeking economic empowerment for their Peoples.

Indigenous communities that recognized Canadian sovereignty found their cultural schemas empowered, granted access to resources like taxes and loans. Those that rejected or contested Canadian sovereignty found their cultural schemas disempowered, disconnected from economic opportunities. Here, recognition operates through shaping which ways of thinking about the world are permissible and which ones are not, empowering the ways of thinking that align with state power and disempowering those that would contest or challenge it.

The Indian Reorganization Act (IRA; 1934) provides valuable insight into the politics of recognition in the United States. Often styled as the centerpiece of what has been called the Indian New Deal, the IRA facilitated land restoration into federal trust and created pathways for resource development under Bureau of Indian Affairs oversight (Biolsi 1992). The IRA was framed as benevolent and supporting the interest of Indian self-determination, but Biolsi (1992) argues it functioned in a paternalistic manner, supporting the interests of the U.S. government over the interests of Indian Nations by linking resources and rights to the adoption of federally sanctioned Tribal Constitutions and Business Councils. In Sewellian terms, the state offered a “resource” (land trust status) only to those who adopted the state’s “schema” (the IRA corporate model). Still, the IRA marked a transition from an assimilationist framework that viewed Indigenous Peoples as domestic minorities to a separatist model that recognized their unique position within the United States and sought to restore, in part, their land base and nationhood.

Steinman (2005:765) argues that the IRA spelled out the relationship between the United States and Indigenous Nations and “ushered in a temporary halt of assimilationist policy” by “modestly empowering reservation *business councils*.” Paradoxically, for Steinman (2004), the IRA left open and ambiguous the relationship between the states and Indian tribes. This legal indeterminacy led to an absence of a relationship or heightened conflict where states perceived an erosion of their sovereignty and tax base due to expansion of trust lands. Some tribes accepted the IRA, but others rejected it outright. Here, we see a deliberate coupling of certain cultural schemas (i.e., those aligned with settler-state interests) to modest resources like land and mineral

rights, meant to tether Indigenous Peoples to resource-extractive economies while preserving conflicts between states and tribes.

These two cases highlight the differences in recognition between the United States and Canada. In Canada, bands are administrative forms produced by the Crown. They are categorically subordinate to the federal government and only rarely correspond to an entire Indigenous Nation. The Crown often split a Nation or People into several competing bands. In the United States, the situation is radically different. Indigenous Nations asserted their nationhood prior to the creation of the United States (Steinman 2012). Their sustained efforts across decades combined with other factors, like legal recognition, that led to a grudging federal and more grudgingly state acknowledgment that Indigenous Nations were not simply minority groups whose collective form was disappearing. This creates a much more complicated bidirectional case of recognition in the United States than in Canada, with Indigenous assertions of nationhood, before and after Independence, leading to Indigenous recognition, or in some cases misrecognition, by federal and state authorities. In Canada, the state invented the band to fit a resource distribution, whereas in the United States, Indigenous Nations maintained a schema of nationhood (Steinman 2012) that the state was forced to recognize, misrecognize, or recategorize (via the IRA) to maintain control.

This view of recognition as the coupling of cultural schemas to resources may reverberate beyond studies of settler-colonialism. A growing number of scholars, led by Lamont (2018), have examined how recognition operates to destigmatize groups by transforming their ideal construction. However, Coulthard (2014), read through Sewell (1992), demonstrates how recognition operates as a deeply material process, empowering or disempowering cultural schemas by coupling or uncoupling them from resources. Recognition may, in a limited sense, increase inclusion, but it may also be a cultural pathway that increases inequality and further disconnects Indigenous Peoples and other marginalized groups from valuable resources necessary for reconstructing and reconstituting their cultures and peoplehood. In the United States, recognizing Indigenous Peoples as minority populations may destigmatize certain aspects of Indigeneity and increase their inclusion, but it will also systematically undermine their desire for national recognition, limiting access to resources and increasing inequality. We may find this form of recognition operant in a whole host of areas, from state formation and capital accumulation to social movements.

Indigenous Agency

Despite Wolfe's (1999:167) focus on total social facts, he does identify Indigenous agency as meaningful and possible: "[T]he logic of elimination constitutes a settler-colonial residue," but "there are also Indigenous residues, traits that lie beyond the interpellations and appropriations of settler-colonial discourse"; if "the idea of the frontier has anything left to express, it is that contact presupposes independence."² Here, Wolfe argues that Indigenous worlds are not reducible to settler-colonialism and that there are Indigenous forms of agency that exceed settler-colonial domination. An ongoing frontier implies that Indigenous Peoples have not been fully incorporated by settler-colonialism and that settler-colonialism requires ongoing exteriority and contact to function. Exteriority resonates with contemporary Indigenous experiences of and scholarship on resistance and holds lessons for studying and theorizing Indigenous agency today. I differentiate between two types of Indigenous agency. The first, *interior agency*, is action within the settler-colonial field. The second, *exterior agency*, is the maintenance and creation of worlds beyond the settler-colonial field. Sewell (1992) helps us understand the former and Indigenous theory the latter.

The strategy of exteriority has been articulated by several Indigenous theorists (Coulthard 2014; Simpson 2014, 2017) and has been a critical source of Indigenous agency. In her writings on the Haudenosaunee, Mohawk scholar Simpson (2014) articulates the politics of refusal,

describing how Indigenous peoples maintain a political and ontological space that exists outside, or exterior to, the logic and authority of the settler state. Coulthard (2014) argues that Indigenous Peoples should act out their own sovereignty by practicing Indigenous legal orders and land-based relationships without waiting for the state to grant permission. For Anishinaabe scholar Simpson (2017), exteriority is a lived practice of existing and creating outside of settler frameworks, what she calls “resurgence.” For Simpson (2017), Indigenous agency should not be spent trying to influence or enter settler structures but building and strengthening Indigenous worlds that are fundamentally exterior to those structures. These authors emphasize how turning away from settler-colonial relations can enhance agency. A Sewellian lens risks viewing these acts as mere transpositions within a larger colonial structure rather than the maintenance of a separate sovereignty.

Indigenous agency considered only from Sewell’s (1992) viewpoint chances losing sight of how Indigenous Peoples continue to live and preserve relationships exterior to the state. What is at risk is the capacity to theorize Indigenous agency as the maintenance of exterior worlds rather than as action within a shared structural field. What becomes unintelligible are practices of resurgence and land-based relationality that do not seek transformation of settler structures but refuse them. By focusing on how Indigenous Peoples use state resources (e.g., the IRA), the Sewellian framework may uncritically reproduce strategies of interiority and miss the more radical move of building beyond, creating worlds that are fundamentally exterior to the state.

This idea maps on to another tension within sociology more broadly. Social theories, especially those in cultural sociology (Alexander 2006; Lamont 2018), often focus on inclusion within society as a panacea for solving the difficulties of minoritized populations (Denis 2020; Ray and Jimmie 2025). However, “this sort of change is inadequate to address the issues faced by Indigenous communities, which are rooted in the elimination of Indigenous Peoples and the theft of their land” (Ray and Jimmie 2025:69). Theorists of inclusion may sustain the notion that Indigenous demands are essentially cultural instead of fundamentally about the return of territory (Tuck and Yang 2012). Indeed, land-based relationships remain an enduring form of Indigenous agency that exceeds both settler-state relations and easy assimilation into Sewell’s (1992) framework.

Indigenous theorists have a great deal to say about the Land that challenges sociology in generative ways (Armstrong 1998; Simpson 2017; Watts 2013). Syilx scholar Armstrong (1998) writes about Land Speaking. Armstrong contends that Salishan languages like Nsyilxcən are derived from the Land, and when she speaks her language, she is both experiencing the Land and giving voice to the Land. This way of viewing human relations does not map on to either the total social fact framework of Wolfe (1999) or the duality of schemas and resources offered by Sewell (1992). Sociologists view land as a resource, valuable for the ends that humans can put it to, but Armstrong inverts this, arguing that Land itself is the source of human language and thought. This reflects a relational ontology where Land is not a passive resource but an active participant in social life. For some Indigenous Peoples, the Land is kin, a relative rather than a resource. This perspective moves Land from an object of human control to a subject that acts in generative ways, not defined by human agents.

Mohawk scholar Watts (2013) shares this focus on the Land. For Watts (2013:21), society does not emerge from human relations: “[W]hat constitutes ‘society’ from [Indigenous] perspectives revolves around interactions between” human and nonhuman “worlds rather than solely interactions amongst human beings.” This framework is denigrated in academic spaces, where it is seen as a mythos rather than an epistemology (Maracle 2015). For Watts (2013:22), “colonization is not solely an attack on peoples and lands; rather, this attack is accomplished in part through purposeful and ignorant misrepresentations of Indigenous cosmologies.” Watts (2013:27), writing from a deeply Indigenous perspective, notes that the Land is female and possesses agency: “[O]ur truth, not only Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee people but in a majority of Indigenous societies, conceives that we (humans) are made from the land; our flesh is literally an extension

of soil.” Watts (2012:31) warns against assimilating this perspective into frameworks like Sewell’s (1992): “[F]rom a theoretical standpoint, the material (body/land) becomes abstracted into epistemological spaces as a resource for non-Indigenous scholars to implode their hegemonic borders.” Place-Thought, as articulated by Watts, reframes agency as emerging from reciprocal relations among human and nonhuman worlds. Place-Thought considers the agency of the nonhuman and how it is the source of our agency or how its destruction and denigration limit our agency. Place-Thought thus foregrounds forms of agency oriented toward building beyond—worlds sustained through Land-based relations that remain irreducible to settler structures or sociological schemas.

Sharing a related insight, Secwepemc chief George Manuel (see Manuel and Posluns [1974] 2019), in his landmark book *The Fourth World*, argues that conflicts between Indigenous Peoples and settlers are rooted in different perspectives about the land. Quoting Manuel, Coulthard (2019:xi) writes that settlers view “land as a commodity, as something that ‘can be speculated, bought, sold, mortgaged, claimed by one state, surrendered or counter-claimed by another,’” whereas Indigenous Peoples view Land “as a relationship: ‘The Land is our Mother Earth.’” Manuel uses the Fourth World to articulate the difference between countries that underwent decolonization in the twentieth century, the so-called Third World, and those where a large settler majority meant decolonization—at least as it was concerned with creating a separate polity and undoing elements of imperialism—was impossible. In these countries, the state is essentially a white possession (Moreton-Robinson 2015) where Indigenous Peoples are consigned to live inside of state borders they do not control. This means the political project of the Fourth World is fundamentally different from that of the third world. For Indigenous Peoples, decolonization cannot mean controlling a polity where they are the minority. Here, we find a warning for a sociology that increasingly calls itself decolonial. Indigenous scholars offer that for Indigenous Peoples, anything short of the return of land to Indigenous Peoples to do with as they please is not decolonization but a move to innocence that sustains settler-colonial rule and white possession (Tuck and Yang 2012).

Coulthard (2019) provides several important insights about Manuel’s (Manuel and Posluns [1974] 2019) project that are relevant to the discussion of Indigenous strategies of exteriority. Through a painstaking analysis of Manuel’s life and career, Coulthard shows how Indigenous movements for resurgence in Canada were deeply enmeshed in movements for decolonization globally, including postcolonial states in Africa, the American Indian Movement, and the struggle for Black Power, expressed by the Black Panthers in the United States. Manuel was deeply influenced by his international travels during the late 1960s, where he met with African leaders from Tanzania, Zambia, and those fighting to end apartheid in South Africa. From these leaders, he gained new insights into the political, social, and cultural revitalization at the heart of the postcolonial movement in Africa. These ideas were formative in Manuel’s struggle for Indigenous resurgence in Canada, which increasingly reached beyond the state to international forums like the United Nations and to solidarity with Indigenous nations in Scandinavia, New Zealand, and Australia.

The global political cross-fertilization at the heart of Manuel’s (Manuel and Posluns [1974] 2019) project challenges “the idea that Indigenous peoples’ openness to engaging outside theoretical traditions somehow equates” to “assimilation and therefore represents and/or serves in the discursive erasure of Indigenous thought and intellectual traditions” (Coulthard 2019:xxx). Here, we have a situation where cultural schemas and resources flowed from domains beyond the Fourth World, where eliminationist dynamics are not formative, a situation assimilable through Sewell’s (1992) framework. Cultural schemas from diverse sources are weaved together and coupled to resources to build new worlds. This is agency (see Table 1) and a unique way of engaging with the settler-colonial field, but it is not everything agency is for Indigenous Peoples.

I offer that it is useful to apply Indigenous theorists to make sense of agency *exterior* to the settler-colonial field, while theorists like Wolfe and Sewell help us make sense of forms of

Table 1. Interior versus Exterior Agency.

	Interior Agency	Exterior Agency
Type of action	Action within the settler-colonial field	Action that sustains Indigenous worlds beyond the settler-colonial field
Theoretical lens	Schema-resource coupling	Land-based, relational, refusal-oriented
Examples	IRA adoption/rejection, Cherokee litigation, self-government agreements	Resurgence, Place-Thought, Refusal, Fourth World Politics

Note: IRA = Indian Reorganization Act of 1934.

Indigenous agency *interior* to the settler-colonial field (Table 1). I want to clarify that the interior/exterior distinction is a heuristic for sociologists to understand different modes of action of Indigenous Peoples, not a definitive statement about Indigenous being.

Steinman (2012; building on 2004, 2005) demonstrates the importance of interior agency. He explicitly deploys a Sewellian framework of cultural schemas and material resources to map how the American Indian Sovereignty Movement (ISM) challenged state structures that constructed Indigenous Nations as minority populations with the objective of extinguishing their sovereign rights. Steinman's Sewellian approach captures how Indigenous actors skillfully contested state recognition across multiple institutional fields within settler-colonial structures as a form of interior agency; my framework extends this foundation by theorizing the boundaries where settler-colonial structures meet an independent, resurgent, or land-based exteriority.

According to Steinman (2012), the ISM had the goal of asserting and forcing the recognition of inherent tribal nationhood and political sovereignty. It aimed to move beyond minority inclusion or civil rights for Indigenous Nations, and it achieved this through several strategies. In the legal and jurisdictional field, ISM forced federal and state courts to recognize tribal courts, tribal law enforcement, and Indian jurisdiction over tribal lands. In the economic field, ISM secured control over land, natural resources, and internal taxation. And finally, in the cultural field, ISM broadened public awareness to understand Native peoples as citizens of sovereign nations rather than marginalized demographics.

Steinman's (2012) case offers a generative research program for sociological theory by considering the relationship between exterior and interior agency. How do Indigenous communities that engage with state recognition processes (interior agency), like the ISM, exhibit measurable transformation in their exterior strategies—particularly around land, refusal, and collective identity? Do they do so in ways that align with or perhaps challenge settler-colonial interests even when such interior engagements (engagement within the settler-colonial field) are strategically intended? For example, how did nations that achieved the legal, economic, and cultural goals of the ISM use this new structural power? Did this power provide new pathways to exteriority like land-based programs, or did it inculcate them deeper into settler-colonial strategies of engagement and recognition, like resource extraction and capital accumulation? Conversely, for those who did not participate in the ISM, did it lead to higher or lower levels of exteriority—agency beyond the settler-colonial field?

My hypothesis is that Indigenous Nations that maintain robust exterior strategies will more often refuse recognition-based frameworks, and those who are more apt to engage in recognition-based frameworks will be less likely to meaningfully pursue refusal, resurgence, or land-based strategies. This generates a comparative research program that builds on Steinman's (2012) work to examine Indigenous Nations with different mixes of interior and exterior strategies, testing whether exteriority conditions the terms of interior engagement—and whether the two can be sustained simultaneously or whether settler-colonial pressures through mechanisms like recognition produce institutional isomorphism.

Conclusions

I have tried to intervene in the structure-agency debate in settler-colonial theory. I pointed to a shortcoming in Patrick Wolfe's seminal theorization, that the totality he posits for settler-colonial structures occludes Indigenous agency. I tried to point to a corrective in the work of William Sewell Jr. and Indigenous theories of agency. Responding to the structure-agency debate in sociology, Sewell (1992) proposes that structure and agency can be meaningfully thought of as a duality of cultural schemas (models for thinking about the world) and material resources (things that take up time and space). I argue this is a more convincing formulation of settler-colonial structure than the one offered by Wolfe (1999). I apply it to two major concepts in settler-colonial studies—the logic of elimination and recognition. From this perspective, the logic of elimination is not a total social process but the result of coupling cultural schemas and resources. Some of these schemas are explicitly eliminationist; others are not. Similarly, recognition works by empowering certain cultural schemas with resources—namely, those that align with settler power, sovereignty, and interests—while simultaneously disempowering other schemas, like those that view land as a set of relations, by disconnecting them from resources. This framework helps us understand the heterogeneity of settler-colonialism—how cultural schemas and resources differ across space, time, and domains. This way of analyzing settler-colonialism can be useful for theorizing forms of Indigenous agency within the settler-colonial field.

However, Sewell's (1992) perspective is less able to theorize forms of Indigenous agency that exceed or stand exterior to the settler-colonial field. To understand these forms of Indigenous agency, sociology may usefully look toward Indigenous theory and concepts like resurgence, Place-Thought, and refusal. Indigenous agency exterior to the settler-colonial field centers forms of agency that challenge both the theorization of Sewell and sociological theory more generally. Scholars like Armstrong (1998) and Watts (2013) draw on the Land to theorize how it enables Indigenous agency and is the source of Indigenous life and futures. Indigenous Peoples deploy diverse frameworks for understanding and engaging with structure, some intelligible within the settler-colonial field and some standing outside it.

Structures are multiple, historically variable, and differently constituted across domains. The forms of agency that structures enable or constrain are just as plural. Sociology has tended to theorize dominated groups as working within a single structural field—negotiating, resisting, or reproducing its terms. The interior/exterior distinction developed here suggests this is analytically insufficient. Dominated groups often sustain worlds that are not just resistant to dominant structures but also generative of alternative ones. These worlds may be organized by different frameworks of land, personhood, and relationality that cannot be fully captured by the resource-schema duality, field theory, or any framework derived solely from the Western sociological canon. This has theoretical implications for how we theorize and study marginalized groups. It means the conceptual authority of sociological theory must sometimes yield to other ways of knowing. A sociology capable of theorizing the full range of human and more than human agency will need to provincialize not just its empirical objects but also its foundational concepts, learning to recognize forms of structure and agency that our own tradition was not built to see.

If there is a lesson here for sociologists looking to do decolonial work, it is this: As a discipline, we should resist blindly accepting the existing canonization of concepts and ideas and then uncritically applying them to Indigenous and colonized peoples. Decolonization demands conceptual shifts, not just moral ones. We must work through canonizations to see how concepts can be made useful and productive, to better understand a world that is still very much settler-colonial, colonial, and increasingly imperial (Cooper 2025), a world where agency is nonetheless still possible (on making things possible, see Abend 2022). This means examining the limits and possibilities of our own concepts, what Go (2020) calls

“provincializing the canon.” The charge is not to abandon sociological theory but to learn when our theories must yield conceptual authority to other ways of knowing and productively couple these models for thinking about the world to our own scholarly and institutional resources.

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Notes

1. Whether one should use “settler-colonial theory” or “settler-colonial studies” is an issue of debate. Here, I use “settler-colonial theory,” most notably that of Patrick Wolfe, to refer to theoretical frameworks used to interpret the process of settler-colonialism.
2. Wolfe briefly acknowledges an ongoing frontier or “residue,” but these function more as a begrudging concession than a theoretically integrated concept. His dismissive framing of these elements leaves Indigenous agency fundamentally undertheorized as his broader structuralist commitments ultimately override these brief caveats.

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