Race Relations in the American West

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DURING THE 1980S, POLITICAL FASHION HAS MOVED AWAY FROM THE TOPIC OF American race relations, but the question of race has remained a central concern of American historians, especially in Southern history. The historical relationship between blacks and whites is what has made the South distinctive and the substantial scholarly achievements of the last twenty years have insured blacks a significant place in Southern historiography. By comparison, the literature on race in the West lacks the stature of Southern studies.¹

Western historians of race relations have, however, accomplished more collectively than the lack of major works in their bibliography might indicate. They may have provided, without fully intending to do so, a new basis for the cherished Western pretensions to distinctiveness which otherwise seem doomed to crumble. Race relations, not usually a matter of local pride in the West, has become one of the few possible foundations on which to base Western regionalism.

That minority peoples should be at the heart of historical claims for Western distinctiveness is an astonishing reversal for Western history. As Richard Hofstadter noted almost twenty years ago in an eloquent and telling criticism of Frederick Jackson Turner, the greatest of the historians of the frontier had hardly responded to the existence of minorities in the West—‘the pathetic tale of the Indians, anti-Mexican, and anti-Chinese nativism.’” Despite Hofstadter’s point that the ‘anguish of history, as well as its romance and charm, is there for the historian who responds to it,’” long after Turner, leading Western historians responded only to the anguish of those who were white. There is much more to minority history than victimization, but for a reminder of the limited sympathy that historians gave to the victims of oppression, it is only necessary to glance through Walter Prescott Webb’s Texas Rangers (1935). Webb’s admiration for ranger heroics obscures their daily and often brutal job of keeping those without white skins in their place. In a way Turner, Webb and lesser lights were unintentionally academic rangers themselves; they wrote of minorities only in terms of conquest and control. The history of nonwhites became justification of their subordination and, once thoroughly subordinated, minorities seemed to vanish from the historians’ horizon.²

As long as Turner’s frontier thesis dominated the study of the West, minorities could not seem significant because the importance of the West was contained in
the frontier—the place where whites met the "wilderness." With Turnerian theory in decline, however, Western distinctiveness threatens to vanish along with the "wilderness" and the frontier. What, after all, has been distinctive about the West? Only, it now seems, a peculiar pattern of race relations, a segmented labor structure based partially on race (Chinese, Chicanos, Indians, and blacks) and the tendency for climate and topography to go to extremes beyond the Mississippi. Without the special experiences of its minorities, the West might as well be New Jersey with mountains and deserts.

Making a case for both the centrality of race relations in Western history and the distinctiveness of these relations involves examining as a single unit a literature which is most often divided into its constituent parts. Reviews of the state of black, Indian or Chicano history are common; reviews of the entire literature on racial minorities in the West are rare. Taken as a whole, however, this literature provides common themes which can cast a new light on the history of the West.³

First, race in the West has always been not so much a biological fact as a cultural and historical creation. Races are created here out of diverse peoples who had not before thought of themselves as a single group, and the history of the West is inseparable from their creation. Second, in the West the so-called territorial minorities—those peoples (both Mexican-American and Native American) absorbed through conquest—have persisted in separate enclaves to a greater extent than elsewhere, making the West politically unique among American sections. Third, in this multiracial West the federal government, because of the special status of minorities, has, far more consistently than in the South or North, emerged as a regulator of racial relations. Fourth, and closely connected with this federal role, race, in a dual sense that will be discussed later, has been an international matter in the West. Fifth, the Western wage labor system both far earlier and to a degree unknown elsewhere until much later depended on a racial stratification of labor. Together these themes, all visible in the new literature, create a pattern of sectional distinctiveness. Examining the sources of this sectional distinctiveness will involve first assessing the meaning of race in the West, then understanding how it has become a matter of international as well as national and sectional concern, and, finally, examining how race and class have intertwined in the creation of the Western economy.

Race in the West began as a cultural fiction whose first chapter was written in Spanish rather than English. Its subject was how an elite, supposedly of pure Spanish descent, ruled over mestizo and Indian peons. The current flowering of Chicano history which began with Howard Lamar’s *The Far Southwest* (1966) and Leonard Pitt’s *The Decline of the Californios* (1970) has repeatedly demonstrated that the claim of wealthy rancheros in New Mexico and California to be of pure Spanish descent was a cultural myth designed to validate a status necessarily achieved through economic means. Even before the coming of the Anglos, race and class became intertwined and confused.⁴

The second chapter of racial fiction came with the American conquest, and
understanding the conquest and subordination of the so-called territorial minorities has remained a necessary prelude to understanding the creation of races and the origins of race relations. Indians and Chicanos, the territorial minorities, were inhabitants of conquered or ceded lands rather than immigrants. The other racial minorities of the West—Asians and blacks—immigrated to the West. And, after the conquest, substantial numbers of Mexicans also immigrated into this country joining, not always comfortably, those Mexican-Americans whose ancestors had been present before the Mexican American War. Chicanos are thus both a territorial minority and an immigrant group.  

The conquests created vanquished peoples who have remained distinct, unassimilated, and largely in place, and thus set the West apart from other sections. These peoples themselves witnessed during the 1960s and 1970s a rather sweeping change in moral attitudes toward the old Western theme of conquest. The anguish of history replaced romance with a vengeance. Books which once might have been proud chronicles of military conquest now took on moral dimensions. In *General Pope and U.S. Indian Policy* (1970), Richard Ellis interspersed the usual account of campaigns against the Indians with an argument that Pope was really a reformer out to conquer Indians in order to save them from extermination. The army has fared quite well in this literature, but where military figures could not be rehabilitated, they became targets of the moral revulsion which propelled Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1976) onto the best-seller lists. Indian wars, particularly those in which local frontiersmen played a significant role, were no longer romantic; they were now very often nasty little pieces of butchery as in Stephen Beckham’s *Requiem For a People* (1971). Robert Utley, the leading historian of the relationship between the Army and the Indians has from his *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (1963) to his recent synthesis, *The Indian Frontier of the American West, 1846-1890* (1984), maintained an older historical concern with armed conflict, but he has brought to it a care and an eye for tragedy, if not always ethnohistorical insight, that separates his work from the older history.  

If by the 1960s Western historians were no longer willing to celebrate Indian wars, neither were they willing to ignore persistent violence in the West. Richard Maxwell Brown’s studies of vigilantism brought a new sophistication to topics historians had usually left to Zane Grey, but there has been some lag in following his lead. Recently Chicano historians have shown interest in social banditry, and Robert Rosenbaum has written a history Mexican-American resistance to Anglo domination in *Mexicano Resistance in the Southwest* (1981). Such studies have demonstrated an unhappy history of racial violence in the West, but such violence has to be kept in perspective. Roger McGrath in his *Gunfighters, Highwaymen, and Vigilantes* (1984) has found little interracial violence in the two California mining towns he studied, although this is partially a result of classifying a local outbreak of “Indian hunting” as a war. Two fine state studies of the Ku Klux Klan also have found that the growth of that
organization in the West was accompanied by little violence and indeed relatively little concern with racial minorities in the West.\textsuperscript{7}

With or without violence, the racism of the Anglo conquest has had the ironic consequence of generating new “races” in the West, by creating a group consciousness in its victims and introducing a tendency to confuse cultural and ethnic identity with racial status. Mario Barrera, in his influential *Race and Class in the Southwest* (1979), argues that group identity among Chicanos originally sprang from a common culture and from the perception of common injustice at the hands of Anglos. The designation *La Raza*, as numerous Chicano historians have pointed out, translates as “‘the people’” rather than “‘the race.’” Anglo-Americans, however, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, increasingly tended to treat this racially mixed people as a single race. Gradually, Chicanos have accepted a separate racial classification, and historians have routinely treated race as a critical division between Anglos and Chicanos. Although New Mexicans continue to claim pure Spanish descent, by the 1960s many Chicanos proudly claimed Indian ancestry. The acceptance of separate racial status has predictably brought a popular myth of racial origins. John R. Chavez in his *The Lost Land: The Chicano Image of the Southwest* (1984) speaks sympathetically of the guiding myth of Aztlan, the supposed ancestral home of the Aztecs in New Mexico, as providing a Chicano identity based on Indian descent. Chicanos seem to present the clearest evidence that racial boundaries in the West are a cultural and historical invention much more than a recognition of a biological fact.\textsuperscript{8}

As for the Indians, race was hardly a category at all before the coming of the whites. Revitalization movements, themselves influenced by whites, sporadically offered the Indian peoples a vision of an Indian race opposed to a white one, but more often Indians thought in terms of local communities with local interests. Peter Iverson’s recent biography of Carlos Montezuma (1982) and Raymond Wilson’s study of Charles Eastman (1983) reiterate what earlier studies of Pan-Indianism argued: that the idea of an Indian race spread most quickly during the twentieth century among those people most fully exposed to white racial thinking in white schools or communities.\textsuperscript{9}

Yet if race began as a fiction, an abstraction imposed on diverse communities to categorize, explain and rank them, it took on a larger historical and cultural reality. To speak of Indian, white, and Mexican-American communities is to accept “race” as a lumping mechanism because Indians, whites and Mexican-Americans were certainly not homogeneous cultural groups. The larger categories represent Anglo-American classifications created on the basis of ascribed racial attributes which were as predictable as they were demeaning and derogatory. According to the ruling mythology, Indians and Mexicans were dark, dirty, without morals, incapable of sexual restraint, cruel, vindictive, and lazy. These groups were not all on a level, but were often ranked according to the immediate economic or political requirements of the dominant whites. “‘Useful’” Mexican-Americans, for example, often ranked ahead of “‘useless’
Indians. Although they contested or rejected specific attributes, the minority groups themselves have accepted and partially transformed these racial categorizations.  

The origin and significance of these racial divisions have not surprisingly become a matter of great significance and controversy. Of the numerous studies of Anglo-American ideas about race published in the last few years, several are particularly pertinent to the West. These books either look at specifically western topics, as Reginald Horsman does in his *Race and Manifest Destiny* (1981), or they examine attitudes towards those minorities such as Native Americans or Chinese who are or were concentrated in the West. Richard Drinnon’s *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire Building* (1981), Robert Berkhofer’s *The White Man’s Indian* (1978), Brian Dippie’s *The Vanishing American* (1982), Richard Slotkin’s *The Fatal Environment* (1985), Stuart Creighton Miller’s *Unwelcome Immigrant* (1969), Alexander Saxton’s *Indispensable Enemy* (1971), Mario Barrera’s *Race and Class in the Southwest,* and Roger Daniels and Harry Kitano’s *American Racism* (1970) all have special relevance to Western minorities.

What all these books share is an attempt to get at the white racial attitudes from what Horsman calls the racialism of the nineteenth century to twentieth-century racism. Because these attitudes rarely stand neatly apart from class conflicts and American imperial expansion, the task of understanding their role in racial relations is not an easy one. It is tempting to escape the problem, as Richard Drinnon does in *Facing West,* by both ascribing virtually everything to a racism which is at once deep and inherent (apparently having long lurked in the European psyche, awaiting a convenient occasion for expression) and yet also is merely a rationalization for imperialism and colonialism. It is equally easy to slide into an economic reductionism which makes racialism or racism a cover for economic motives. Even Horsman’s fine book, *Race and Manifest Destiny,* which begins by regarding racialist ideology as a seemingly autonomous factor that “accompanied and permeated” commercial and agrarian drives for expansion, eventually reduces racialism to a rationale for economic interest. Mario Barrera’s equally important *Race and Class in the Southwest* also ends up concluding that racism is ultimately an ideology maintained to benefit the interest of a ruling class. Such interpretations say more, perhaps, about the wishes of liberal and radical historians to make racism a simple function of capitalism or a peculiar property of Europeans and Anglo-Americans than they do about the evidence available.

Racism and racialism as most scholars use the terms were not inchoate prejudices; they were systematically developed sets of ideas. Racialism, for example, did not simply contend that nonwhites were inferior: it asserted that they were permanently inferior and that providence had doomed these inferior peoples to disappearance or slavery. Such beliefs drew heavily, as Robert Berkhofer has argued in *The White Man’s Indian,* from a long European and
American tradition of confusing race, culture and nationality. Key ingredients of racialism thus predated the doctrine itself and continued to exist outside of it. Brian Dippie found, for example, that although the idea that Indians comprised a race doomed to vanish providentially before whites was a major component of racialism, it long predates any systematic racist theory. The historian must therefore be careful in evaluating these ideas. Every racist statement cannot be taken as evidence that the speaker subscribed to the whole system.\textsuperscript{13}

Identical beliefs about race, for example, could lead to quite different conclusions depending on whether the believer accepted or rejected the whole racialist ideology. Take the idea of a vanishing race. Within a racialist context with the supposition of a fixed and unalterable set of racial characteristics, extermination became the providential conclusion of the "Indian problem." Indians, so the logic went, were a dying race incapable of accommodating themselves to changed conditions and American institutions. Christian reformers, however, gave the idea of the vanishing race a quite different outcome. They did not think of the elimination of Indians in the nearly genocidal terms of racialists; instead they thought of it in cultural terms. Indians would disappear as a distinct group, but individuals of Indian descent would survive. These people would, however, be indistinguishable from whites in language, culture, occupation, and religion. They were physically and mentally capable of doing anything a white person could do.\textsuperscript{14}

The views of reformers are important because racialism and racism never cleared the field of competing values. Christian values shaped the missionary efforts which were recently examined in Floyd O'Neil and Clyde Milner's \textit{Churchmen and the Indians} (1985), and democratic egalitarianism also shaped racial relations in the West. These earlier democratic, egalitarian, and Christian values, were, of course, themselves imbued with racial thinking, but the taint of racism does not mean that other values can be disregarded. Wilcomb Washburn, for example, was ready in \textit{Red Man's Land/White Man's Laws} (1971) to acknowledge American hypocrisy and greed, but he also recognized that an "application of legal and moral principles, weak though they may have been" had preserved for American Indians a more favorable status than that of other conquered native peoples. Reginald Horsman, perhaps, expressed this most pithily in his \textit{Expansion and American Indian Policy} (1967) when he wrote that Americans "wanted land, but they also wanted a good conscience."\textsuperscript{15}

The assimilation of Indians, not their elimination, became the hallmark of American Indian policy in the West. The thinking of policy makers was often racial, but seldom racist. Robert Trennert in his \textit{Alternative to Extinction} (1975) states flatly that "the formulation of all Indian policies in American History, even the most just, has been based on certain attitudes that could best be described as racial," but the very title of his work reveals that his policy makers, as distinct from Horsman's racialist thinkers, did not consider biological extinction inevitable. From Henry Fritz's \textit{The Movement for Indian}
Assimilation, 1860-1890 (1983) to William T. Hagan’s recent detailed study of the Indian Rights Association (1985), assimilationists have been as prominent in the literature as they once were in the reform organizations. F. Paul Prucha has given the paternalist and assimilationist strain of Indian policy its strongest and most forceful statement. Prucha, whose books form the single most impressive achievement in not only the history of Western race relations but in Western historiography in general over the last two decades, has placed Indian relations within the larger political and cultural concerns of a paternalism centered in the white Protestant middle class. The reformers who came from these ranks imagined the integration of the Indians into American society in much the same terms as they thought of the assimilation of immigrants. Race, in the sense of innate and unchangeable biological differences, simply was not the critical issue in the late nineteenth century for those who made Indian policy. However, the reliance of these reformers on Christian and egalitarian values did not prevent them from doing vast harm to Indian peoples. As Fred Hoxie has argued in an important new work, A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920 (1984), race would become more important in the early twentieth century when changing academic thinking on race modified reformers’ hopes for rapid assimilation. Even here, however, racism altered the timetable rather than changing the goal.  

Although racialist theory enjoyed more influence in regard to the Chinese, some central tenets had to be drastically modified before this theory could affect policy. Alexander Saxton and Stuart Miller, although their analyses differ, both agree that the “Chinese question” was racial as well as economic. In Saxton’s words, their exclusion was secured in “purely racist terms.” Racialism, however, proclaimed not only that the Chinese were inferior and unassimilable, but that they would inevitably die out and vanish in the presence of superior races. Yet, since the problem was that the Chinese population was increasing, the whole logic of racialism had to be reversed. Late nineteenth-century opponents of the Chinese now argued that the Chinese would inevitably pauperize white labor and thus had to be driven out before they became demographically dominant on the coast. This is a defensive, worried racialism far different from the aggressive, optimistic ideology Horsman describes.

Just as minority peoples have created their own racial consciousness in the twentieth century, they have also become adept at using cultural formations of the larger society to protect, at least partially, their own interest. The civil rights movement is one example, but perhaps a more pertinent example is the use Indians have made of American law. Beginning with Wilcomb Washburn’s Red Man’s Land/White Man’s Law, many twentieth-century studies of Indian-white relations have taken a legalistic turn, for it is increasingly the peculiar legal status of Indians that gives them such protection as they still possess. Predictably (given the influence that John Collier and the New Deal had on the current legal status of Indians in this country) biographical, legal and political studies of
Collier, the Indian Reorganization Act, and the Roosevelt Administration dominate twentieth-century studies. This work, highlighted by excellent biographies of Collier by Lawrence Kelly (1983) and Kenneth Philp (1977), Graham Taylor’s synthesis of the Collier years in his The New Deal and the Indians (1980), and studies of the Navajos by Kelly (1968) and Donald Parman (1976), has been, on the whole, critical of Collier. While admitting Collier’s success in halting the alienation of lands and in stopping the worst excesses of acculturation policy, these historians have criticized the Collier administration for imposing white governmental structures, continuing in new forms Indian subordination to whites, creating new sources of division within Indian communities, and allowing, under new guises, the exploitation of Indian resources with little benefit to Indian peoples.  

A counterattack, however, is mounting based upon Collier’s contributions to Indian sovereignty. In two recent books, Vine Deloria and Clifford Lytle have defended Collier. They emphasize that Collier’s administration reinvigorated, albeit incompletely, the unique relations of Indian communities, with their dual citizenship and reserved sovereignty, to the larger society. There is at times a certain romantic ahistoricism (actually reminiscent of Collier himself) in these books as when the authors argue that Indian communities were all once religiously, culturally, socially, and economically homogeneous. In their more characteristically tough-minded, if narrow, legal approach, these authors, both of whom are lawyers, contend that Collier and his allies cleverly used the ‘vested powers’ clause to make an argument for inherent sovereignty and thus opened an avenue for restoring a limited tribal sovereignty in practice. Despite its powerful presentation, this is a vulnerable position. Russel Barsh and James Henderson in The Road: Indian Tribes and Political Liberty (1980) acknowledge the importance of the vested powers clause, but they have pointed out that the same doctrine still allowed Congress to eliminate the residual sovereignty of Indian nations without recourse. Barsh and Henderson’s own journey through the tangled, contradictory, and often confused legislation and court decisions that comprise Indian law ends far more pessimistically than does that of Deloria and Lytle.  

Although Indian sovereignty does bestow on Native Americans a status different from other racial minorities in the West and makes white-Indian relations a relationship between governments as well as individuals and social groups, there are some parallels among other minorities. Because American law prevented immigrant Asians from obtaining citizenship, the relationship between Chinese, Japanese, and whites on the West Coast repeatedly involved formal negotiations between the American government and those Asian governments that sought to protect their nationals within the United States. Shihshan Henry Tsai, in his China and the Overseas Chinese in the United States, 1868-1911 (1983), has recently given an account of those relations for the Chinese. Earlier, Roger Daniels’ The Politics of Prejudice (1962) showed the
reciprocal influence between California’s discrimination against the Japanese and international politics. The extreme example of the extent to which race relations in the United States can be a function of international politics is, of course, Japanese relocation, a topic which Daniels succinctly covers in his *Concentration Camps, USA* (1972). 20

For different reasons, the condition of Mexican-Americans has also become a matter of international as well as national concern. The proximity of Mexico to the United States and the relative ease with which the border could be crossed initially led many Mexican immigrants to view their stay in the United States as a temporary one and to make no attempt to obtain American citizenship. More recently, as changes in immigration laws have rendered much migration illegal, many immigrants are not eligible for citizenship. The result has been the residence of large numbers of Mexican nationals in the United States and concern by the Mexican government with both the well-being of its people and the agreements governing immigration. As a result, here, too, racial relations within the Western states is to a degree a matter of negotiations between national governments. Francisco E. Balderrama’s *In Defense of La Raza* (1982) has recently examined the involvement of the Mexican consulate in the affairs of Mexican-American communities in Southern California during the Depression. Balderrama built on a theme more narrowly developed by Abraham Hoffman in his excellent study (1984) of the movement to deport Mexican nationals (and their children who were citizens) during the Depression. This dual international aspect of race relations in the West—both the relationship of the United States with semi-sovereign Indian nations located largely in the West and the international negotiations between the United States and other nations over foreign nationals in the West—sets the West apart from other sections. 21

When race relations are considered as international relations, historians have assumed two sides to the relationship as a matter of course. When, however, race relations have been considered solely within the United States, a unilateral perspective has held sway. By the 1960s critics of the older literature on race relations contended that studies within the West, regardless of the quality of their scholarship, remained inadequate because they involved no “relation” at all. A relationship, no matter how inequitably power exists within it, presumes at least two people or groups of people, each of whom affects the other. Existing histories, they argued, treated minorities as so much clay (if an admittedly often hardened and intractable clay) in Anglo hands. 22

Such criticisms have been met unevenly in the various minority histories of the West. The history of Asian peoples in the United States has, with certain notable exceptions, been more concerned with what was done to them rather than what they did for themselves. Black history in the West is black-centered, but outside of a few works like Nell Painter’s *Exodusters* (1976), it lacks the sophistication of Eastern studies in re-creating black communities and experience. Most black history in the West tends toward what Lawrence de Graaf has called the
contribution school. It emphasizes black participation in realms where they had previously seemed invisible. Rudolph Lapp's *Blacks in Gold Rush California* (1977), Elmer Rusco's "*Good Time Coming?: Black Nevadans in the Nineteenth Century*" (1975), studies of the Buffalo Soldiers, black infantry, black cowboys, and more general studies of the black West all fall within this genre. In many of these books, blacks emerge as determined political actors in the West who are aspiring to an equal political status that no other nonwhite group initially sought. This claim, as Leigh Dana Johnson has demonstrated in "*Equal Rights and the Heathen 'Chinee,'*" (1980) was sometimes quite opportunistic. Rather than being couched in terms of universal political rights and liberties, it depended on attacks on other minority groups.23

The new history which has demanded that minority history be more than a tale of helpless victimization has made its strongest inroads among studies of Indians and Chicanos. In 1971, in his call for a new Indian political history, Robert Berkhofer tried to direct attention to the ability of Indians to influence the context of contact with whites and to shape consequent relations. Yet it has really only been within the last few years that the newer literature has flowered. In tribal histories such as Peter Iverson's *The Navajos* (1981) and Gary Anderson's *Kinsmen of Another Kind* (1984), the authors concentrate on Indian actions and the struggle of Indian peoples to adjust to a world they themselves have helped change.24

At its best, the new history can yield startling new perspectives on familiar problems. Three recent books, each examining a different period and aspect of Indian-white relations, can serve as examples. George Phillips' study of Southern California, *Chiefs and Challengers* (1975), takes the kind of contact study which has been done numerous times and transforms it by making the Indians more than victims. In Phillips' book, Indians, their society, their outlook, and their actions take on an historical significance and vitality that is lost in many earlier works. Race relations becomes a relationship, and understanding this relationship involves looking at Indians whose own internal differences make them a diverse and complicated people.25

As two other recent books demonstrate, Indian actions remain crucial even after they are placed on reservation, a realm once treated as a place thoroughly dominated by whites. Clyde Milner's *With Good Intentions* (1982), a study of Quaker control of three reservations following the Civil War, demonstrates how the orthodox Quaker ambitions for "eventual cultural conversion through assimilation" became entangled in tribal and intertribal politics. Indians were not powerful enough to stop whites from doing untold damage, but they could and did act to frustrate policy aims. Finally, Loretta Fowler's recent *Arapaho Politics* (1978) is perhaps the most impressive achievement of all. Fowler's surprising and convincing analysis examines how the Arapaho have, in a reservation context, created new sources of authority which not only sustain community consensus, but also are, at times, "remarkably effective in
influencing federal representatives." In this impressive book, Fowler explains how the Arapahos have exploited whites' commitment to assimilation to hold their own communities together.26

As a group it is Chicano historians who have most productively used the techniques of the new history to uncover a social world previously invisible to historians. Even the initial surveys such as Matt S. Meir and Feliciano Rivera's *The Chicanos: A History of Mexican Americans* (1972) and Rodolfo Acuña's *Occupied America* (1972), for all their concentration on spectacular Anglo-American acts of oppression, also attempted to get at the response of the people affected by these acts. They touched on Mexican-American lives largely through studies of representative or exceptional people; the newer histories concentrate on institutions and networks of oppression and assemble aggregate views of Chicano communities. Mario Garcia's *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso, 1880-1920* (1981); Richard Griswold del Castillo's *The Los Angeles Barrio, 1850-1890: A Social History* (1979) and his *La Familia* (1984), and Albert Camarillo's *East Los Angeles, History of a Barrio* (1983) are all examples of the hold that the new history has on Chicano history.27

Of the dangers that lurk in the new history, the most prevalent is a tendency to reify culture and to see it as a shield magically holding back the malice of oppression. Arnoldo De León's *The Tejano Community*, for example, verges on making culture the almost mystical palliative of the poor. Under conditions of oppression and poverty partially created by racism, Tejanos supposedly have developed a unique culture which, paradoxically, racism cannot touch, and this has enabled them to survive Anglo-American oppression and discrimination. Although the significance of culture in understanding how groups survive is undeniable, formulations such as De León's also contain a stiff dose of cultural romanticism.28

Griswold del Castillo's *La Familia* gives a more restrained and convincing account of the influence of ethnic culture in a world that it does not fully control. Griswold del Castillo tries to examine the persistent "conflict between the beliefs and values held by Mexican-Americans regarding the proper and desirable way to live within families and the economic pressures of the American capitalist system." In some areas, such as the prevalence of female-headed households, particular Mexican-American cultural values seemingly play little or no role in actual social outcomes. Female-headed households are a phenomenon of the urban poor of all races and ethnic backgrounds in the cities he examines. In many other areas, such as extended families, culture does seem to play a role. Patriarchal values, he argues, do not disappear but they exist apart from practice in daily life. Despite familial decay, there is significant persistence and stability in cultural values, but neither practice nor values are homogeneous. They are subject to regional, class, and generational differences.29

As Griswold del Castillo in *La Familia* recognizes, cultural and social relations exist among and overlap with economic relations which are interracial
as well as intraracial. Again it is Chicano historians with their focus on a dual or segmented labor market who have most fully studied the social and economic relations between races in the West within capitalism. In the much larger literature on Indians, there have been comparatively few detailed studies of either the influence of particular economic groups on Indian policy or of the economic history of Indian groups, and even fewer attempts to understand racial relations within western capitalism. Some of these studies, such as my own *Roots of Dependency* (1983) and Joseph Jorgenson’s *The Sun Dance Religion* (1972), have argued that Indian poverty has been the necessary corollary of white development. Jorgenson has, however, in a series of publications gone further. He has argued for a model that combines a metropolitan-satellite analysis of the economy and a neocolonial interpretation of Indian reservations. These factors, along with racism, explain the economic deprivation of Indian peoples.  

Jorgenson’s general approach is more widely shared among Chicano than among Indian historians. Mario Barrera, Alfredo Mirandé and Evangelina Enríquez, Rodolfo Acuña, Tomás Almaguer, Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz and others have used the theoretical framework of internal colonialism to interpret Chicano history. As a theory, unfortunately, internal colonialism is weak. Unlike Jorgenson’s neocolonialism, which is based on actual territorial entities (the reservations), internal colonialism often exists only on the level of metaphor; it is an assertion that the relationship of nonwhite racial groups to a dominant group is comparable to the condition of a colony to a mother country. Since the internal colony lacks territorial bounds and its members move within the larger society, it must be defined by race and class, but calling race and class mixtures “internal colonies” does not yield the analytical clarity promised. Indeed, it often paradoxically yields a certain economic reductionism in which race itself becomes significant only as a means of signifying the particular victims of economically inspired oppression.

The internal colonial model obfuscates more than it explains, but its initial linkage of race and class in creating a dual labor system provides a promising lead. Mario Barrera in his *Race and Class in the Southwest*, for example, has attempted to understand the larger economic processes that affected, to different degrees, not only Indians and Chicanos but also Chinese and blacks. He does so by dividing the economy into four sectors. The first sector is precapitalist and peripheral to the larger economy. Here, for example, among Mexican-Americans, traditional peon-patron relations remained in force or, among Indians, the horticultural-grazing economies of the Pueblos and the Navajos still functioned. The second is the “colonized” sector characterized by a dual wage system (one for whites, the other for minorities), occupational stratifications with certain jobs designated for minorities, and the use of minorities as a reserve labor force who are the last hired and the first fired. This sector has dominated the West for much of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The third sector
is composed of those people who, having been displaced from the traditional
economy, have not been absorbed into the larger economy. They have become
economically marginal. This has been the fate of many Indian peoples. The
fourth sector is conceivable rather than realized. It is an integrated sector where
minorities participate in the larger economy without racial distinction.32

These often simultaneously existing sectors make it possible to categorize and
understand most Western economic development and the social relations that
have accompanied it. Precapitalist relations, which could, as in Mexican
California, be extremely exploitive and cruel, clearly dominated the West before
American conquest, and persisted, particularly among territorial minorities, for
a significant period of time. Even at their peak, these precapitalist relations were
penetrated by the fur trade, the trade in cattle hides in California, and the Santa
Fe trade in New Mexico, but the bulk of the economy did not depend on either
commerce or wage labor. These precapitalist economies disappeared in several
ways. Native elites were often quite eager to transfer resources into the
advancing capitalist economies. Leonard Pitt, Albert Camarillo, and Griswold
del Castillo have demonstrated how Californio elites in Southern California
initially benefited from American recognition of their land grants; Arnoldo De
León in The Tejanos has pointed to initial ability of Tejanos to maintain their
land base in Texas, and Mario Barrera in Race and Class in the Southwest has
recognized similar and more permanent gains for part of the New Mexican elite.
Most resources, however, did not remain under elite control. Sometimes
precipitously, as in California, and sometimes gradually, as in New Mexico, the
property base of Mexican-Americans narrowed. Other resources such as
communal lands were not so readily committed to capitalist development, but
they, too, as Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz has chronicled in Roots of Resistance
(1980), could be stripped from their holders.33

Such changes forced many, but hardly all, minority people into a dual labor
system. For rural Mexican-Americans the loss of land—whether communal
holdings or ranchos—forced them from traditional pursuits either as farmers or
vaqueros on ranchos into the larger labor market. Many Californians, for
example, came to perform labor very similar to that they had once delegated to
Indians, but they did so within a wage labor system rather than through peonage.
Indians themselves fared unevenly. Those who managed to retain even a reduced
land base possessed a buffer against the emerging capitalist economy. Unlike
Mexican-Americans, they became not so much a ‘‘colonized’’ sector of the
economy as a marginal one. Such marginality, however, did not mean that
islands of older subsistence systems persisted intact amidst the larger
commercial economy. Since whites could commandeer necessary resources,
Indian peoples were, as Veronica Tiller demonstrates in The Jicarilla Apache
Tribe (1983), often reduced to desperate poverty. They could neither maintain
old resources nor gain access to new ones.34

With its linkage of class and race, Barrera’s so-called ‘‘colonized’’ sector,
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despite its name, has proved very useful for understanding economic relations between Chicanos, Asians, blacks and whites. Except in times of severe economic dislocation, such as the Depression when whites displaced minorities even in lower-paying jobs, certain categories of manual labor have been reserved for minority workers in the West. Mario Garcia has given the fullest account of how this dual labor system operated for Chicanos in his fine book, *Desert Immigrants* (1981), Douglas Monroy has examined its creation in Los Angeles (1983), and a recent article by Sucheng Chan cites evidence that suggests a similar system among the Chinese (1984). The races of the workers who filled these jobs varies; in California Indians succumbed to disease and violence, the Chinese took over the menial work, and when the Chinese were excluded, Chicanos assumed the jobs. No matter which nonwhite group occupied the lowest tier, the structure of the work force remained basically the same. Black history provides similar examples of stratification although they are usually not analyzed in these terms. For minority peoples, either the refusal to accept or the inability to obtain employment within this system meant relegation to the periphery. When the economy turned downward, a precariously placed group could undergo an experience like the repatriation described by Abraham Hoffman in his *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression*.35

Various groups, of course, did try to penetrate the integrated sector, but for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries racism kept them out. Nell Painter’s superb book *The Exodusters* examines ultimately unsuccessful black attempts to set up independent farming communities in the West. White businessmen as well as workers used violence and the power of the state to frustrate Chinese ambitions. John Modell makes it clear that the one group that is most often cited as achieving economic success within this system—the Japanese-Americans—actually did so only by accepting caste status and by restricting their economic entrepreneurship to very narrow niches. Before World War II they largely confined themselves to labor intensive agriculture and fishing, gleaning opportunities that whites had largely overlooked. Anglo-Americans greeted their success with political and economic retaliation, but this did not prove serious until World War II because the Japanese were confined to a few areas, were not numerous, and were willing to accept subordinate status.36

Chicano historians have actively investigated the significance of race in this dual labor system. They have compared Chicano immigrant experience and those of Eastern and Southern Europeans, and have found significant differences. Eastern and Southern Europeans, although branded as racially inferior in the early twentieth century, lost the burden of racial inferiority relatively quickly, while for Chicanos its grew more onerous. Mario Garcia, who tends to see Chicanos more as an ethnic immigrant group than a racial minority, explores the parallels most fully. For example, he writes that Chicanos “shared a common tie with the larger wave of Eastern and Southern European immigrants” as well as with blacks. Chicanos, too, were people uprooted by
economic dislocation in their homelands who came to the United States, but once in the United States racial and cultural discrimination influenced their fate. White immigrants eventually moved into the middle class far more rapidly than minority racial groups. Mexican-American economic subordination was not maintained without a struggle, and several Chicano historians have examined attempts at labor organization and resistance.37

Freed of the burden imposed by the internal colonial model, the linkage of class and race in the dual labor system of the West becomes central to understanding Western development and distinctiveness. Whether identified in terms of Barrera's sectors, or what John Modell has called caste, or what Griswold del Castillo has in *La Familia* identified as Milton Gordon's category, "eth-class," formed by the "intersection of the vertical stratification of ethnicity and the horizontal stratification of social class," an analysis of the ways race and class overlap is central to understanding Western race relations. The dual labor system reveals how minorities are at once connected with the larger economic system in the West and segregated socially from the surrounding society.38

Yet race and class, while central to an analysis of Western society, can obscure other real but subtle connections between the peoples of the West. Outside of the economy, scholars have tended to ignore the ways in which seemingly separate cultural and social worlds intersect. They write as if cultural contact in the West is analogous to magnetic attraction and repulsion. One group of scholars proclaims, for example, that Indians and whites could never achieve understanding. Another, rearranging these cultural magnets, proclaims that cultures must drift together and the acculturation of minorities is inevitable. When put alongside recent Canadian studies of the rise of the Métis these seem rather unsophisticated ways to understand cultural conflict. Sylvia Van Kirk's *Many Tender Ties* (1983), Jennifer Brown's *Strangers in the Blood* (1980), and the articles in Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer Brown's *The New Peoples* (1985) probe beneath the cliches of contact and present a sensitive account of women as brokers between different cultures. Yet, the American West lacks a group of mixed Indian-white ancestry as clearly defined as the Canadian Métis, and so parallel American studies have thus far been confined largely to the Great Lakes. Studies on women as cultural mediators in the West have often been quite thought-provoking, but they can also go too far in their claims. Glenda Riley in *Women and Indians on the Frontier* (1984), for example, argues that white women slipped the boundaries of racism and made a more sympathetic contact with Indians than did white men, but her evidence is not fully convincing.39

There have recently been two surprising exceptions to the dearth of studies on how everyday contact between people of difference races and cultures proceeds. James Ronda's recent *Lewis and Clark Among the Indians* (1984) and Mauricio Mazon's *The Zoot-Suit Riots* (1984) both manage to mine familiar materials in new ways. They get beneath the usual conventions of race relations and attempt to explain the complexity of actual contact between different peoples. Mazon's
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book in particular, with its attempt to examine symbolic behavior to discover the
"underlying assumptions and distortions in behavior,"
will probably inspire controversy and skepticism, but it is an intriguing explanation of the odd riots in Los Angeles during World War II. It is only through such studies of daily contacts and the symbolic understanding (which is often acted out) that one racial group has of another that the consequences of the structures of racial relations will be fully understood.40

In the post-Turnerian West, then, the topic of race relations has moved from
the periphery to the center. The newer literature has revealed a system of racial relations in which minority racial groups have been created, subordinated, exploited, demeaned, and segregated in a manner which, despite similarities in some particulars, is significantly different from racial relations east of the Mississippi. Minorities have resisted and endured, if not prospered, in ways that have deeply influenced the history of the West. They have responded to racism by participating in the cultural creation of races, altering their own cultures, and making regional racial relations also a matter of international relations. Western economic development depended on their labor. The barrios, Chinatowns, Indian reservations, and black ghettos which seemed for so long peripheral to whatever significance the West has had in American history will, in the long run, emerge as crucial to any Western claim of historical distinctiveness, and, more significantly, to any real understanding of Western society and history.

NOTES

1Here I have in mind the work of Eugene Genovese, John Blassingame, Lawrence Levine, and Leon Litwack, etc.


13Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian*, 51-60; Dippie, *Vanishing American*.


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28 De León, The Tejano Community, xi-xiii, xiv, xviii, 156ff. De León, in reality, actually denies culture by creating a set of aspirations based on a universal and simple human nature; xii-xiii, 79, 204.


