

[Lecture] Colonial and Post Colonial Issues: Hispanics in the United States

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Colonial and Post Colonial Issues : Hispanics in the United States

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Good afternoon. I am so pleased to be invited to speak to you. Please forgive me that I am not able to speak in your language. My thanks to my able interpreter Yukiko Sawazaki.

I was told that during the course of your study, you have become very interested in the topic of Post Colonialism. Issues of colonialism and post colonialism have always intrigued me also. In the United States these issues are at the heart of an on-going debate about the rights of different minority groups, particularly a group that calls itself the Chicanos.

Any discussion of colonialism and post colonialism must begin with the history of the United States, which is not a very long one in terms of most other world powers. United States history is one of movements from one state to the other, from the colonial to the post-colonial and often back again. The issue is so complicated and in such a state of transition that I am not sure what definition to apply. To begin with, it is difficult to come up with a clearly delineated definition of colonization. The experts don't agree. Depending on their political stances, they often present different interpretations.

We do know that there have been colonies as long as there has been recorded history. Conquests by Ancient Egypt, Persia, Greece and Rome lead to colonies in the lands they had defeated. Arab, Mongol, Chinese and Japanese histories are also full of expansion into neighboring and distant countries and the establishment of colonies there. Sometimes, a colony is established in the midst of a defeated or conquered people and then the colonized people usually outnumber the colonizers. Historically, the fact that colonized peoples have

far outnumbered their colonizers has made little difference in their power. Sometimes, however, over the course of time, with organization and rebellion, numbers can make a difference. In the United States, the colonizers from Great Britain began with few in numbers, but increasing immigration reinforced their population. Also, the native people's numbers were decreased through disease and warfare. Over time the colonizers began to outnumber the colonized. Native Americans make up a small percentage of our population now.

By the 20th century, the United States, which was once a colony, was considered one of the modern world's major colonial powers. However, from the 15th to the 18th century, the United States, and, in fact, most of North and South America was in a constantly shifting colonial state. What is now New York, was at one time New Amsterdam, a Dutch colony. Ditch Guiana was a colony in South America. Both were then taken by conquest by the British in 1664. Some hundred years later, New York was one of a number of British colonies that rebelled against the mother country to form the original United States. At that time there were only 13 colonies, which became thirteen states, each state jealous of its own power. The thirteen states grew into 50 by a process that included purchase, conquest, and rebellion. What we regard now as the United States was originally colonies of France, Spain, and Mexico.

French colonization was strong, particularly along the Mississippi River, where early settlements had been established by the explorer La Salle in the 1600s. The state of Louisiana still has a large population descended from the early French settlers. Cajun food, language, and culture are clearly part of the dominant appeal of the area. New Orleans has a decidedly French flavor to this day and that history is celebrated. In 1803, the United States purchased a huge area of land—the western basin of the Mississippi river—what was then known as Louisiana—from Napoleonic France. France herself had lost the area to Spain during the 1700s, but when Napoleon gained power, he took the lands back from Spain. Florida was purchased from Spain in 1819. One of our most recent states, Alaska, was originally a Russian colony, which was sold to the United States in 1867. It then spent a great deal of time as a territory, before it became a state in 1958. So you see how our history is one of changing colonies and colonization.

[Show map of European advance 1750]

The only one of the 50 states to have been an independent country before it became a state is Texas, my home state. It became a country, briefly, when it had a successful revolution in 1836 against Mexico, of which it was once a part. Mexico, which had been a colony of Spain, had won its independence during the 1810s in a series of wars for independence. Shortly thereafter, as a result of the Mexican–American War, California too was ceded to the United States, although a small sum was paid for it. The states that are now Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, and parts of Wyoming, Kansas, and Oklahoma were all parts of the territories gained after events in the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s. In fact, it can be argued, depending on whether one takes a long or short view of history, that the United States is a Post Colonial nation made up of the former colonies of England, Spain, and France.

[Show map of The War with Mexico 1846–48]

Customarily, when we think of colonies, especially those of the great Western Powers, we think of lands some distance from and separated from the ruling country, often on a different continent. We think of the British colonies of India and Rhodesia. Or we think of the French colonies of Algeria and Vietnam. This is not always the case.

In the late 1960s, as more and more minority groups in the United States began to assert their rights and protest against discrimination, Chicano political activists advanced the theory that they are an internally colonized people. Beginning with the premise that Chicanos are an internal colony suffering from the legacy of the American conquest, one scholar, Rudolfo Acuna, in a book called *Occupied America*, claims that “the experiences of Chicanos in the United States parallel that of other Third World people who have suffered under the colonialism of technologically superior nations.”

Let me begin by defining my term. Chicano is the designation used to identify people in the United States who are of Mexican heritage. The internal-colony model rests on the claim that the Southwest has been subjected to a conquest and a ruthless process of colonization that left Mexican Americans in circumstance similar to those of nations that had been colonized by imperialist powers. A dual wage system, rampant segregation, exploitation of natural resources, cooptation of the native elites, and other characteristics of a foreign colony are present in the Southwest according to this theory. They claim to be colonized internally because they are on their own homeland, but that homeland has

been subsumed into an alien country and culture and though they are technically Americans, they are not treated as full citizens.

Strengthening the sense of colonization was a rereading of history as presented in United States textbooks. Rather than seeing the rebellions against Mexico as motivated by the desire for democracy and resistance to tyranny, they claimed conspiracy for revolution and war and a desire to steal lands. Rather than accepting the United States myth, a new myth was created, a myth of a land called Aztlan. Aztlan was the land from which the Aztecs had migrated to build their great Tenochtitlan, present day Mexico City. The myth-makers were not concerned with geography. Although the original history only says that the Aztecs had come from north of Mexico City, the militant Chicanos declared that Aztlan was the whole of the Southwest. Aztlan became a battle cry and history was reread so that people who migrated north from Mexico into the United States were no longer immigrants, but the sons and daughters of the former Aztecs, seeking to reclaim what was once theirs. Aztlan is that area of the southwestern United States that takes in California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas, and Oklahoma.

As a side note here, let me remind my audience that these self-righteous revolutionaries are descendents of an even crueler colonization than the one they claim to have suffered from. The Spaniards and Mexicans who came to California, New Mexico and Texas did not pay for the land they so brutally took from the people they encountered living there. Nor did the U.S. citizens who came into what was once Spanish or Mexican territories try to force the people there to accept their religion, as the Spanish priests did, who forcibly baptized the native populations.

The history of what happened to native peoples in all of the Americas is a chronicle of shame. When Hernan Cortez landed in Mexico in 1512, there were 6 million native peoples living in the central Mexican valley. By 1700, there was only 2 million left. The Incas of Peru were decimated by Pizarro. In fact, all indigenous people have been brutally and callously treated throughout Central and South America in lands colonized predominantly by Spain, but also by France, Portugal, and England.

In the United States the chronicle of shame is well documented. One of our main national holidays is Thanksgiving. On that day, we give thanks, because a small band of

colonists, with few supplies were brought food and had a feast with the indigenous peoples to celebrate their survival. In turn, the descendents of these early settlers made and broke treaties with the Indians and eventually deprived them of all of their lands except for specially designated reservations. Some thanks for kind deeds! Though the holiday has become one of family thanksgiving for all the blessing of everyday life, there are still some remembrances of those early colonists and their gracious hosts.

[Show map of Removal of Indians 1829-40]

Another problem when dealing with the question of those that might define themselves as internally colonized in the United States is that of labeling. Who are the people I am talking about? The United States Government uses the label Hispanic to include a wide variety of people. It refers to all people in the U. S. whose ancestry is predominantly from one or more Spanish speaking countries. This covers a large group with widely differing histories, people whose families have been in the country for generations and people who may have crossed the border yesterday. Many use instead the term "Latinos" which they define as populations with ties to Latin America. This term creates other definitional problems. Parts of Latin America were colonized by the Portuguese, who have a different language and culture from the Spanish-speaking colonies. Descendents of enslaved Africans also make up large portions of the populations of certain Caribbean islands and maintain parts of their African cultures. As you can see, these labels create as many problems as they resolve.

One particular group that has received a great deal of attention of late is the Cuban-American community. Though they are often lumped together with other Hispanic or Latino group, in fact their history is quite distinct. They are, for the most part, political exiles who came in large numbers in the 1960s fleeing the communist takeover of Cuba. In a way, they can be defined as colonists themselves, for they have taken over large parts of Florida, installing their customs and political agenda. They have also gained considerable political power. One has only to evaluate how the two candidates for the presidency have fallen all over themselves to try to gain their vote during this recent Elian Gonzalez debacle. The mayor of Miami, a Cuban-American, defied the federal government and fired both his city manager and police chief (non-Cubans) in the wake of these events. Clearly, the Cubans have colonized, if not all of Florida, then the southern part for sure.

This preamble is just by way of pointing out the pitfalls and problems of defining our subject. Just who are the colonized people in the United States? If we want to go back far enough, we could argue that what is now the territorial United States and in fact all of Canada and Mexico was originally colonized by Asian peoples who came across the Bering straits centuries ago.

[Show map of Asian migration]

For this discussion, however, although I will occasionally discuss other Hispanic groups, when the need arises, my main focus will be the Chicano/a subset of the Hispanic population of the United States. This may be the only group, other than the Puerto Ricans, that has a coherent argument for considering themselves, in some sense, colonized, using a definition that is based on conquest by a foreign power. Essentially, they are peoples whose lands and country fell under the control of a foreign power. Oscar Martinez, in his history of Chicanos/Mexicanos says "In effect, the Chicanos of the Southwest became a colonized group, having undergone foreign conquest and marginalization within the American system. This particular group, called Mexican-Americans or Chicanos, lives mostly in California and the Southwestern States." However, they have not remained in these colonized lands. They have migrated in large numbers to other states.

(Review map of Top Ten States of Mexican American Population as of the last Census)

Having been brought up on the border between the United State and Mexico and living there most of my adult life, I feel best qualified to discuss this particular group of colonized, de-colonized, post-colonized and colonizing people.

Borders are always elusive areas. It is only chance and strange fates that establish the fact that a line is drawn haphazardly to separate one nation from another. I live and work in the United States of America, but when I look out of my office window, I look at the many homes that dot the streets of newly grown "colonias" of Juarez, Mexico. At one time the river was considered the border, but even rivers move. The Rio Grande River is the border in my city, but has changed its boundaries and so treaties had to be established and a large disputed area called the Chamizal was ceded back to Mexico by President Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s.

Let me move back now to how the Mexicans became colonized. Part of it was the fault

of the Spanish and Mexican governments. In the early 19th century, they encouraged foreign colonization of their northern provinces because they could not get their own peoples to move there. This was because the land was sparsely populated and weakly protected. Life was rough in the uninhabited and wild northern provinces of Mexico. In 1821, the Spanish government allowed Moses Austin and 300 Anglo families' land grants to settle in Texas. Later, when Spain lost her Mexican colony, Austin reconfirmed his titles during a visit to Mexico City. Later, other impresarios brought other settlers, often groups that were not as law-abiding and thankful for their land as Austin's group. Problems developed as a result of lack of political representation and conflicting cultural values. By 1836, a full-fledged rebellion erupted and in the end, Texas won its independence from Mexico. It became a Post-Colonial state.

This left Tejanos (people with Mexican rather than Anglo heritage) in a difficult situation. If they did want to become involved in the battle, they had to leave their properties and risk losing them. Those who stayed felt the brunt of strong racist sentiments, because of the growing nationalism in Texas and the desire of many of the insurrectionists to ally themselves with the United States. From 1836 to 1845, Texas was a Post-Colonial country. But, in 1845, it became part of the United States. That was viewed as annexation of Mexican territory by the Mexican government and it created a rupture in diplomatic and eventually a war, which lasted from 1846-1848. The war ended with not only Texas, but also a great part of Mexico's northern provinces in U. S. hands

[Show the war with Mexico map]

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the war, guaranteed citizenship, property and religious rights to the people of Mexican descent living in the annexed lands. However, the reality is that many lost their land, suffered discrimination and reduced status in the community. It must be added that the degree of colonization varied from place to place. In California and Texas, which saw large influxes of Anglo settlers and voters, the degree of colonization was most severe. In New Mexico, however, Hispanics remained in the majority and so local leaders retained some significant control.

The last part of the 19th century saw many of the working class and poor Chicanos relegated, because of discrimination, poverty and poor education to underclass status. Then, in the early part of the 20th century, during the Mexican Revolution, a revol

against the tyrannical government and dictator - Porfirio Diaz, hundreds of thousands more Mexicans fled into the United States. They did so, either to get away from the fighting or for economic opportunity. They settled in cities not too far from the border—like El Paso, San Antonio, Laredo, Tucson, and San Diego. Many were working class, but there were also middle and upper class immigrants, fleeing political persecution. Until WWI, crossing the border was relatively easy. Mexicans moved back and forth with relative ease. U. S. employers sent contractors to sign up workers as soon as they crossed the bridge; some even sent recruitment agents into Mexico. Mexican and Chicano laborers contributed significantly to the growth of the Southwest, particularly in sectors like agriculture, mining, ranching and urban industries.

[Show chart of Mexican Immigration 1901-1990]

The Great Depression which began in 1929 and continued through the 1930s greatly decreased the work opportunities for Mexican laborers.

As should appear clear from this graph, massive immigration in the last part of the 20th century has greatly complicated the issue of colonization. With the continual influx of legal and illegal immigrants arriving from Mexico daily, can one say that Chicanos are moving into a Post Colonial State? Emma Perez calls Chicanas of the 19th century a diasporic yet colonized race (xviii)

All of the above history of the Mexican-American or Chicano brings us to the present. Are Chicanos now in a post-colonial period? Emma Perez, a Chicana historian at my university says that Chicanos at this time, exist in a time lag between the colonial and post-colonial, what she defines as the de-colonial imaginary. She states: “If we are dividing history into these categories—colonial relations, postcolonial relations, and so on—then I would like to propose a de-colonial imaginary as a rupturing space, the alternative to that which is written in history. I think that the de-colonial imaginary is that time lag between the colonial and the postcolonial, that interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated.”

It is an interesting time lag we are living in. I would like to present still a different argument. I think that one could almost say that what is happening is not the de-colonial or the post-colonial, but that a re-colonization is in process. The Mexicans are taking back the lands that once belonged to them.

Since the late 1960s, two major factors affecting immigration to the United States have become clear : an increase in the rate of undocumented immigration and a shift from Europe to Asia as the predominant source of immigration. The latest data of estimates before the 2000 Census predicts that the Hispanic population will triple to 98 million by 2050. This will make them the largest minority group in the country.

Before I discuss this movement to re-colonization, let me present you with some data about the characteristics of the Chicano subset of this fast-growing Hispanic population. According to some recent figures, people of Mexican descent, who compromise the largest group within the country's Hispanic population, are the least likely among Hispanics to be college-educated. Only 7 percent of the nation's 20 million Mexicans held bachelor's degrees as of this year. Cubans were the Hispanic group most likely to be college-educated with 25 percent of that population holding bachelor's degrees or better. Nearly 28 percent of non-Hispanic whites finished college.

[Show Statistical Profile of Mexican Americans 1990]

Post WWII growth of population in the area identified as Aztlan, has brought many benefits to those segments of the population most favorably situated to take advantage of the new opportunities. The improved position of upper and middle-class Chicanos is reflected in increased ownership of expensive home and thriving businesses and in much greater political representation. For example, in cities like Brownsville and Laredo, where Hispanics comprise 85 percent and 92 percent of the cities' population respectively, Chicanos are in firm control of local politics, occupying the top elected and appointed positions.

May I use the example of my home city. Chicanos are 78% of the populations of El Paso. The mayor of the city is Carlos Ramirez, a Chicano. Most of the judgeships, the superintendents of the public school systems, the police chief, and other officials are all Chicanos or Chicanas. Where once it was difficult for Chicanos to achieve any political positions, now it is next to impossible for someone with an Anglo surname to be elected to political office. Even when the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce or other Chicano activist groups come out in favor of a candidate with an Anglo surname, the Chicano population automatically votes for a person with a familiar Mexican name. Where once, the speaking of Spanish was forbidden at school or at work, now many jobs require that

the workers be bilingual. Many administrative offices are staffed with people whose English-speaking skills are minimal. At stores, clerks walk up to you and address you first in Spanish, before switching to English if you don't respond. Spanish-speaking radio stations outnumber the English-speaking stations. Mexican food restaurants occupy every street. All of the objective signs of colonization are there. We have been colonized by Mexico. So while they may feel themselves in a post-colonial or de-colonial situation, those of Anglo heritage are moving into a colonial state.

This is even truer in other communities. There is a small town, called El Cenizo, on the border between Texas and Mexico, which passed an ordinance requiring all city meetings and business to be conducted in Spanish.

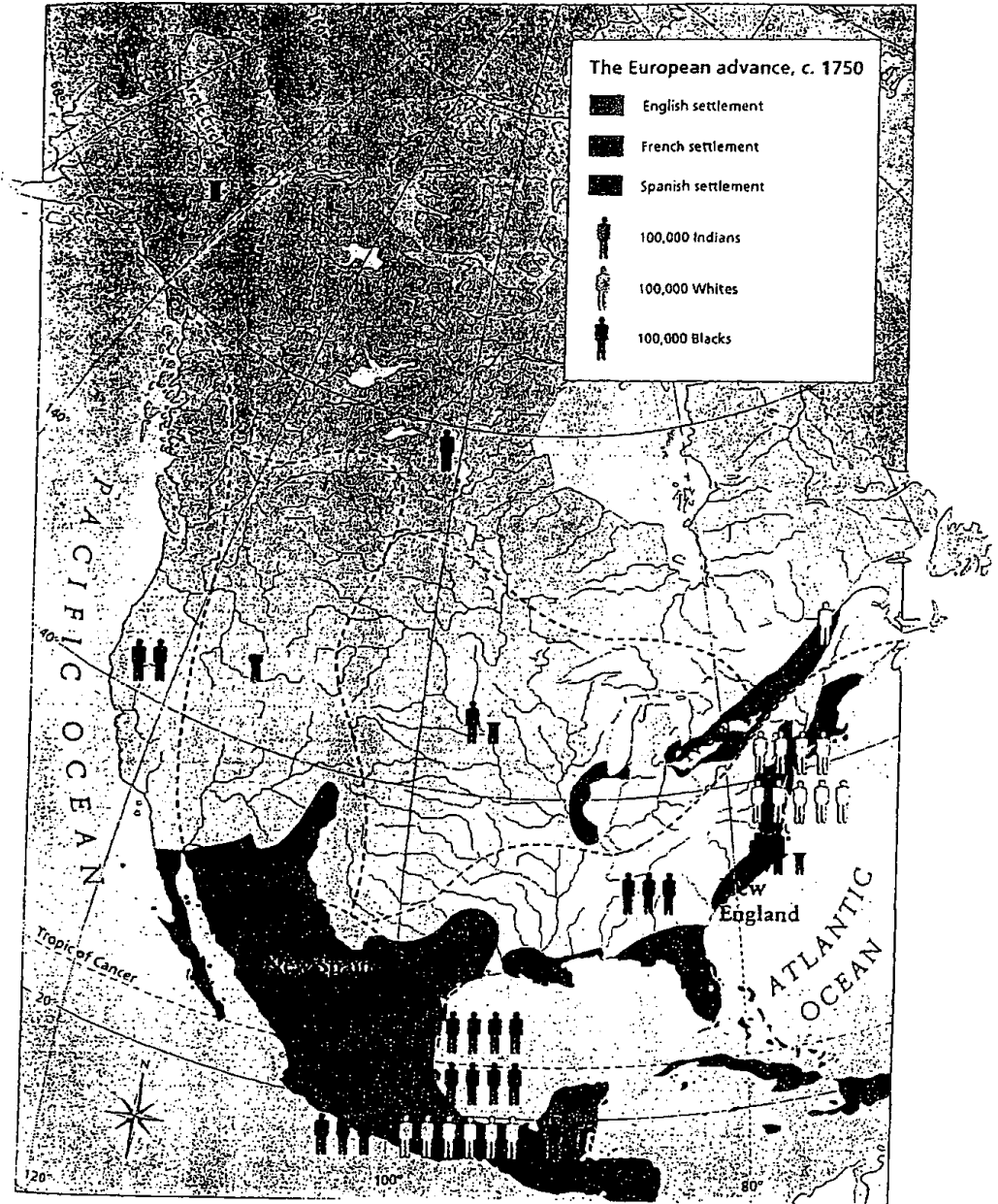
The move toward colonization is further fueled by a recent law passed in Mexico. This law allows Mexicans who move to the United States and become U. S. citizens to retain their Mexican citizenship also. I do not have enough time fully discuss the ramifications of such a move, but the implications are clear. The history of colonization is one in which the citizens of one country move into another for the purposes of economic benefit while retaining their loyalty to the mother country.

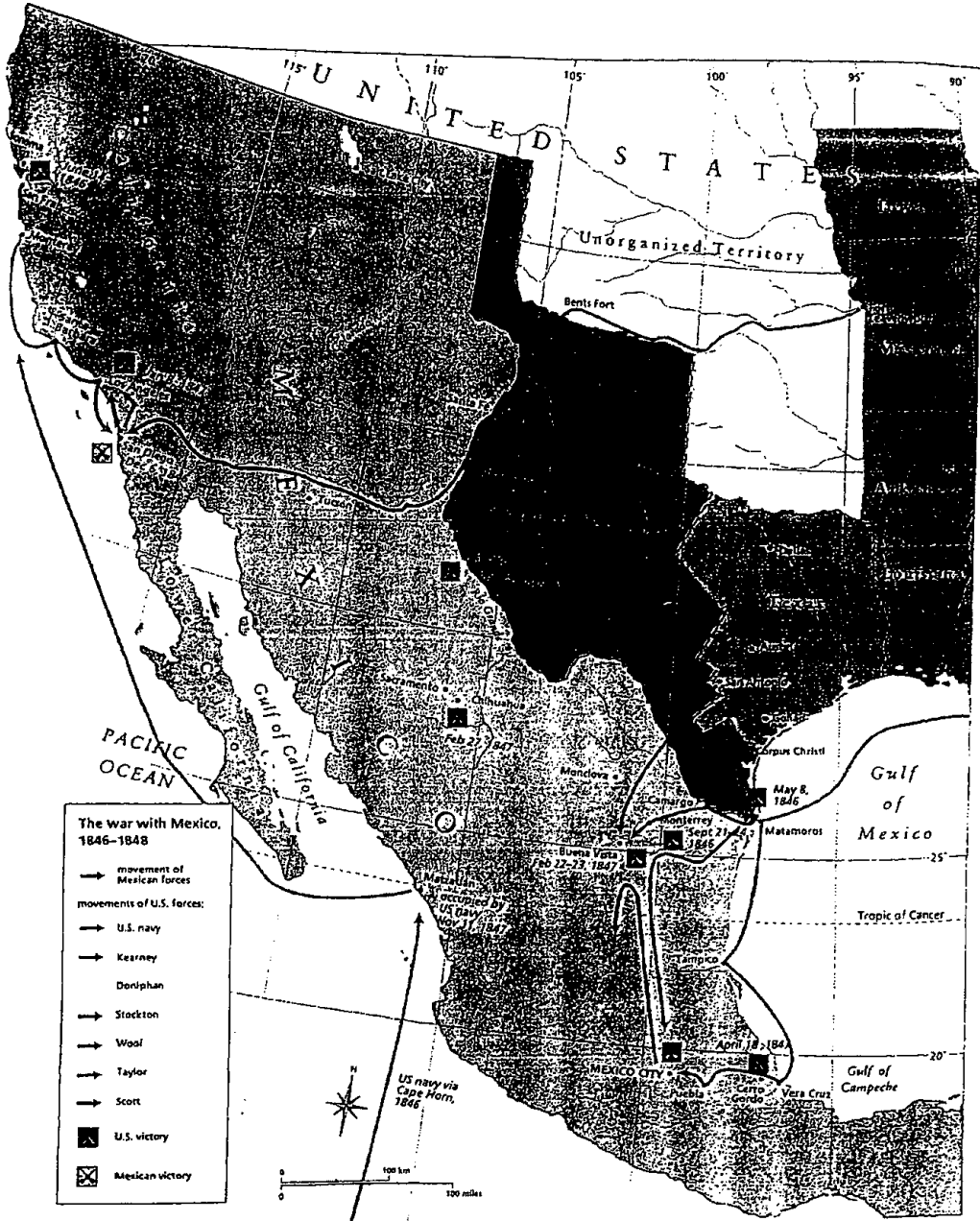
The history of the United States is a history of immigrants, most coming either for economic opportunity or to escape political or religious persecution. In the first generation, the tendency is to retain their native languages and customs, to live in enclaves of similar immigrants. In the next generation, the children become more integrated into the culture, often speaking the language of their parents only haltingly. By the third generation, most of the traditions and language are lost. But, that has been the case of people who cross oceans to arrive here and are thus cut off from the influences of their original cultures. The same is not true for Hispanics, and most particularly not for Chicanos who remain living geographically and culturally close to their homeland and traditions. What I see happening all around me is Mexicans who come over to the United States to work, but continue to live in Mexico, or Mexicans who build houses in El Paso, but continue to have their businesses in Mexico. One such family is moving in next door to me. As more and more Mexicans live in a state of dual citizenship, United States customs and culture are bound to be effected. Schools have adapted to the needs of Spanish-speaking students. Businesses find it necessary to have Spanish-speaking clerks, and Mexican holidays, such

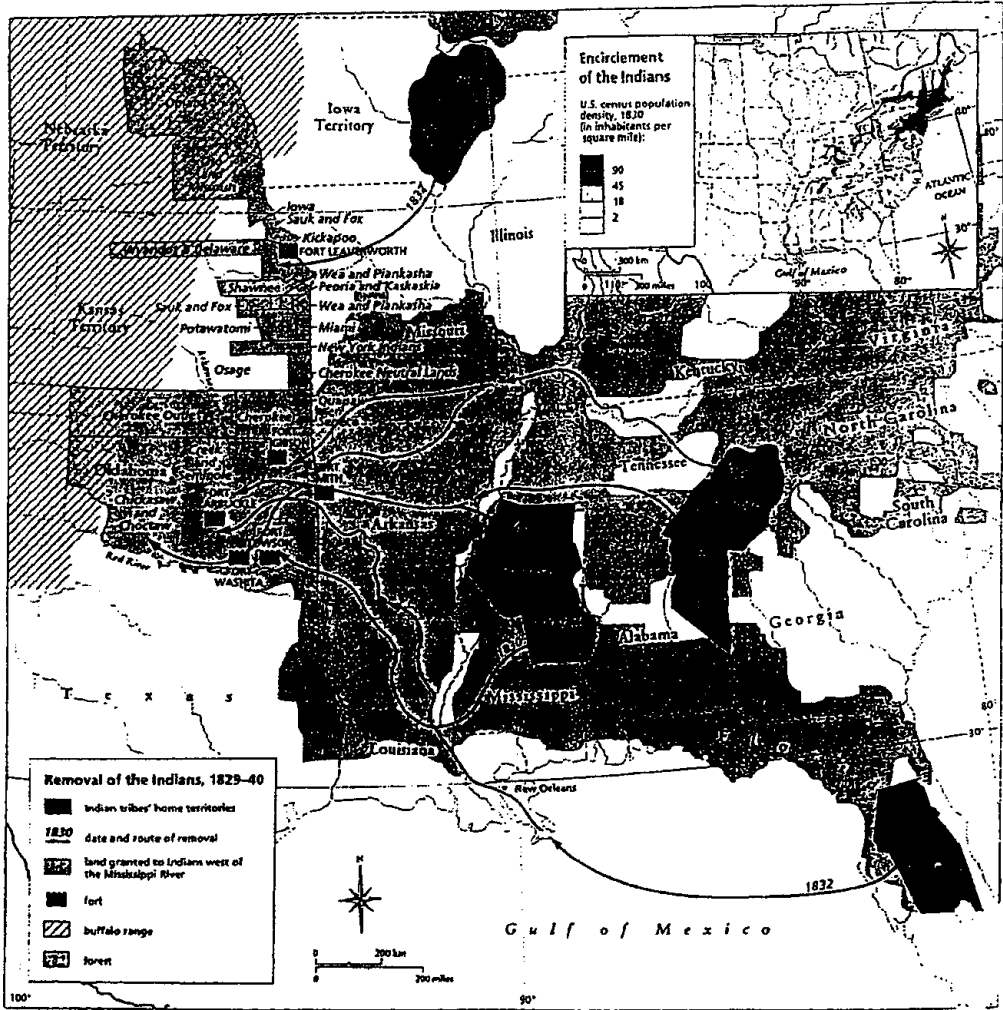
as Cinco de Mayo (May 5) and Diez y Seis de Septiembre (September 16) are also celebrated in El Paso. It would be hard to deny that what is happening in the Southwest is a new colonization.

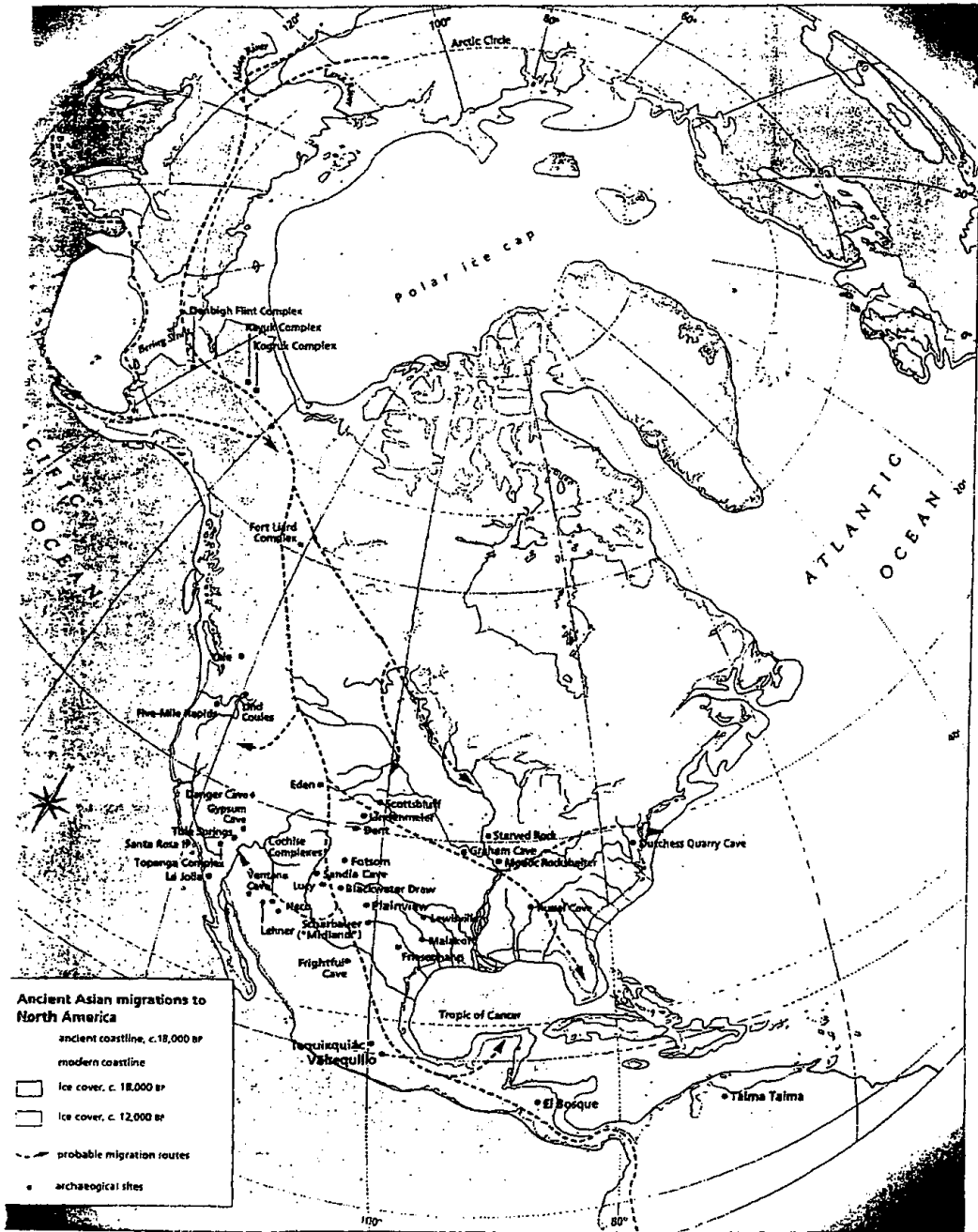
Kansai 17 May 2000

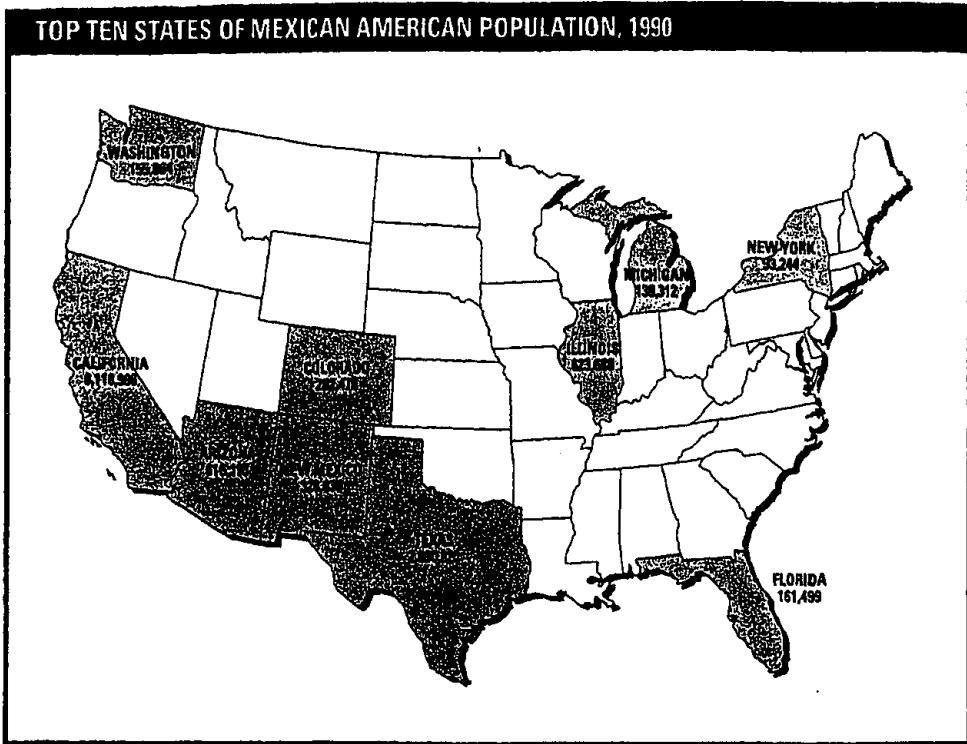
M. R. Gladstein





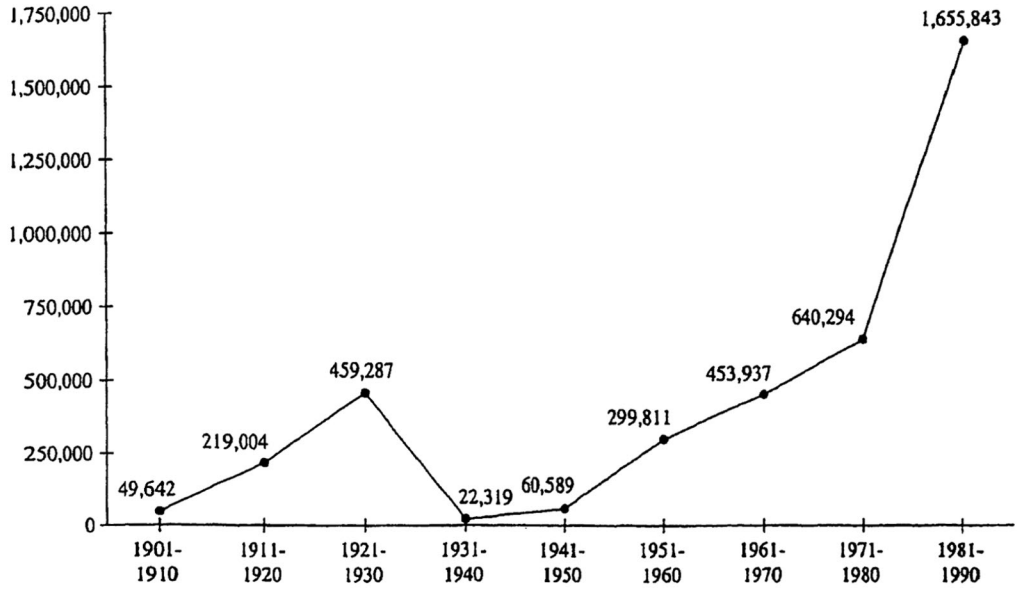






Source: Data are from Marlita A. Reddy, ed., *Statistical Record of Hispanic Americans* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1993), Table 107.

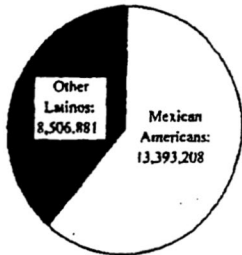
MEXICAN IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES, 1901-1990



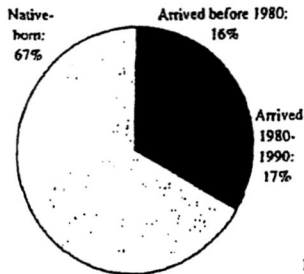
Source: Data are from Marlita A. Reddy, ed., *Statistical Record of Hispanic Americans* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1993), Tables 25 and 26.

STATISTICAL PROFILE OF MEXICAN AMERICANS, 1990

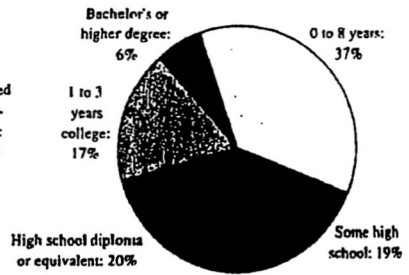
The Latino Population



Nativity*



Schooling Completed (persons 25 years of age or older)



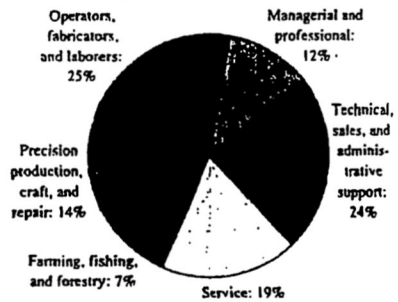
English Language Fluency (persons 5 years of age or older)



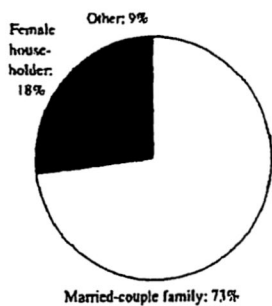
Labor Force Status (persons 16 years of age or older)



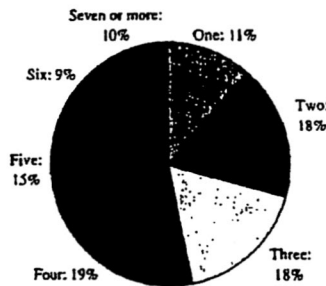
Occupation Median household income: \$23,694 Per capita income: \$7,447 Percentage of families in poverty: 23.4%



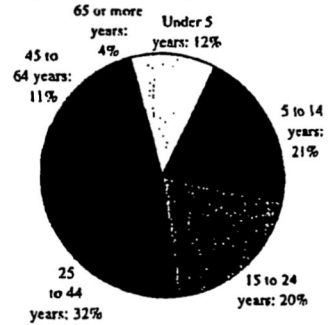
Family Type



Household Size (number of persons)



Age (median = 23.8 years)



Source: Bureau of the Census, *Census of 1990: Persons of Hispanic Origin in the U.S.* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of the Census, 1993), Tables 1-5.

Note: All figures and percentages are based on a sample, rather than 100 percent, of the Latino population, as done in reports from the Bureau of the Census.

*Of all "foreign-born" Mexican Americans, 22 percent were naturalized.