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John R. Chávez
Southern Methodist University, jchavez@smu.edu

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Aliens in Their Native Lands: The Persistence of Internal Colonial Theory

JOHN R. CHÁVEZ
Southern Methodist University

Historically, struggles, such as those of the Basques in Spain, the Palestinians in Israel, and Mexicans in the United States, have had much to do with claims to homeland, to issues of indigeneity, ethnic intermixing, precedence, and immigration, where the claims of natives usually trump those of colonists, settlers, or immigrants, at least ethically. In the U.S. case, the view of Mexicans as alien immigrants to the Southwest has derived from Anglo-Americans' perceptions of themselves as natives of the region despite their own historically late arrival as a people. One result of that perception has been the denial of freedom of movement to masses of Mexicans who have had to hide from authorities in order to work and live in areas that were once part of Mexico. The predominant myth of the "land of immigrants" with its theoretical corollary of assimilation has served to justify the unequal treatment not only of such "illegal aliens," but of legal residents and U.S. citizens of Mexican descent. In response to that myth, ethnic Mexicans countered with their own image of the northern borderlands as a lost homeland and in the 1960s helped develop a sophisticated theory to support that image—internal colonialism.¹


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“Originally,” according to Mexican social scientist Pablo González Casanova, “the term ‘colony’ was used to designate a territory occupied by emigrants of the mother country . . . then colony was understood . . . as a territory in which the . . . emigrants dominated the indigenous peoples.” Subsequently, observers applied the term to peoples and regions within the boundaries of independent states. By the 1960s this “internal colonialism” became an important theory advanced to explain the historical development of ethnic and racial inequality in the modern world. The concept gained wide acceptance among historians and others in Latin America, Europe, and the United States, especially as regards ethnic Mexicans in the latter. However, by the 1980s the theory had been critiqued and dismissed as inadequate, for ignoring class and gender among other matters; nonetheless, the concept’s influence persisted as more global colonial theories evolved. This development suggests that proponents of internal colonialism were too quick to surrender their arguments. Instead, they needed to revise them and elaborate them in light of the opposing opinions, because internal colonialism continues to explain most effectively the historic subordination of indigenous peoples within larger states dominated by other groups.

In short, internal colonialism seeks to explain the subordinate status of a racial or ethnic group in its own homeland within the boundaries of a larger state dominated by a different people. An example would be the Navajos whose reservation exists under the supervision of the surrounding United States. Historically, that status usually results from military conquest, typically followed by political, economic, cultural, and complete social and even psychological subordination. The degree of domination varies by time, locale, gender, class, and other factors, such as the presence of additional ethnic groups, which create complex hierarchies—as in the nineteenth-century dominance of Anglo-American male merchants over patriarchal Mexican landowning families that in turn subordinated matrilineal Navajos in New Mexico. Internal colonialism is the domestic subset of a larger colonial (or imperial) paradigm, including formal colonialism, neocolonialism, postcolonialism, borderlands theory, and postnationalism, that explains broader relationships of ethnic inequality across history and geography, thus suggesting more appropriate solutions to that inequality than other theories. Internal colonialism is applicable globally to dynastic and national

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states, as well as contiguous empires, from antiquity to the present—a breadth that attests to this theory’s importance.3

**Colonialism/Imperialism**

Internal colonialism derived from earlier and even broader theories attempting to explain territorial expansion and ethnic conflict. According to these, colonialism (often conflated with “imperialism”) was the process through which many if not most peoples confronted each other around the world. Through this process, colonial theorists argued, one people for its own benefit dominates another, usually including the latter’s land. Formal colonialism is the acknowledged governing system utilized by empires in the provinces, but it has deeper economic, cultural, and social processes. Over the centuries of European imperialism, thinkers as opposed as Adam Smith and Karl Marx had repeatedly examined colonialism, but with the intensification of anti-colonial movements in the twentieth century, the discussion became even more intense with the commentary of such nationalist leaders as Mahatma Gandhi and Gamal Abdel Nasser.4

The internal colonial concept initially appeared in scattered observations casually comparing domestic regions and peoples in Europe, for instance, with those in formal colonies. Perhaps the first to develop the analogy (without the internal label) into an ethnic thesis were actually apologists for colonialism in response to decolonization pressures after World War II. In 1952 Belgian delegates at the United Nations noted that expansion overseas was not essential to the colonial process since modern national states had themselves been formed by their core populations dominating surrounding lands and neighboring ethnic groups. The delegates argued that in subjecting native populations in

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3 In this article, the terms concept, model, theory, and paradigm refer to the increasingly complex developments around the basic idea of colony.

the Congo, Belgium had simply followed the civilizing mission overseas that the American republics, including the United States, had followed across their continents: “In remote areas within the borders of the States so constituted . . . are backward peoples, of different race and culture. Civilization is henceforth transmitted to these peoples by territorial contiguity, but the basic problems involved remain unchanged [compared with colonialism overseas].” Though carried out within national boundaries, the process remained that of one people dominating another and its land. Recognizing the similarities in subordination of overseas and domestic “natives,” other thinkers would later take a more critical view of this internal process.5

By the late 1950s colonialism in general was being analyzed more closely by critics, such as Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi, who saw it from the perspective of natives of Martinique, Algeria, and Tunisia within the French Empire. These thinkers analyzed the system humanistically, as well as scientifically; their personal experiences as the “colonized” gave their work an immediacy that detached analysis lacked. They argued that “colonizing” nations had not merely denied native peoples self-government, economic self-sufficiency, and social self-determination, but that domination had also had a debilitating effect on the individual cultural and psychological self-worth of these populations, effects that carried over after the independence of their lands. Naturally, these ideas gained adherents in those parts of the world where formal colonialism had existed and found applicability in places as disparate as the Congo, Vietnam, and Guatemala.6

Neocolonialism

As the traditional European empires disintegrated through decolonization after World War II, neocolonialism and internal colonialism

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came under increasing scrutiny. Among others, African leader Kwame Nkrumah argued, in Neo-Colonialism: The Last State of Imperialism, that newly independent nations might be politically free, but they could remain subordinate, especially economically, to the former metropolis or another power. This became increasingly evident elsewhere, and in other ways, as the United States began to step into the shoes of the traditional empires, replacing for example Britain as a supporter of Israel and France as a supporter of South Vietnam. Indeed, the introduction of U.S. troops into Vietnam seemed not merely neocolonial but a reversion to imperialism. As opposition to the war increased, students of American minority groups began to compare their situations with that of the Vietnamese and other neocolonized peoples. As early as 1962, influenced partly by Mexican Enrique González Pedrero's thought on neocolonial Cuba, Harold Cruse wrote of a "domestic colonialism" in describing black Americans. By 1967 activists Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton elaborated the colonial analogy in Black Power, without calling it internal, even as they cited I. F. Stone referring to an "internal imperialism."7

Internal Colonialism

Influenced by these general intellectual currents, Pablo González Casanova produced two seminal articles, “Sociedad Plural, Colonialismo Interno y Desarrollo” (1963) and “Internal Colonialism and National Development” (1965) in which he defined the casual internal phrase, developed an incipient theory, and applied it to Indians in Mexico. While describing many aspects of colonialism, González argued that its essence was “based on domination... which the conquest of some peoples by others historically produces”—as when the Spanish defeated the Aztecs. He then narrowed to the domestic colonial variety, “internal forms of colonialism remain after political independence”—as when creole Mexicans continued to dominate Indians. Additionally, he included the spatial dimension of internal colonialism: “It is the result of an encounter between two races, cultures or civilizations whose

genesis and evolution occurred without any mutual contact up to one specific moment”—as in the original geographical separation between Aztecs and Spaniards until their encounter in Mexico. Though Mexico as a whole gained its independence after three hundred years of Spanish colonial rule, González pointed out that the Indians in the sovereign state remained in the same, if not a worse, colonial relationship relative to criollos and mestizos as under Spain. After independence, national development proceeded with the continued subordination of peoples, such as the Mayas in peripheral regions. In subsequent articles, González’s colleague Rodolfo Stavenhagen applied the internal colonial model more extensively to include Guatemala, while Julio Cotler applied it to Peru.8

Sociologists Robert Blauner and Joan Moore applied the colonial concept more formally to American minorities. In his 1969 article “Internal Colonialism and Ghetto Revolt,” Blauner first used the term in regards to black Americans but also referred to it as an analogy, because “Though whites certainly colonized the territory of the original Americans, internal colonization of Afro-Americans did not involve the settlement of whites in any land that was unequivocally [sic] Black.” However, he added, “The slave trade . . . may have been a necessary prerequisite for colonial conquest—since it helped deplete and pacify Africa.” Significantly, a year later in the same journal, Social Problems, Joan Moore first applied the model to Mexican Americans. She pointed out that “Here the colonial concept need not be analogized and, in fact, it describes and categorizes so accurately that one suspects that earlier ‘discovery’ by sociologists of the Mexican Americans, particularly in New Mexico, might have discouraged uncritical application of the classic paradigms to all minorities.” She of course recognized the “voluntary” immigration of Mexicans after the conquest of far northern Mexico by the United States, but also noted the con-

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continuing domination of those migrants in their former national territory. While Blau ner went on to apply internal colonialism to other racial minorities in the United States, Moore's rendition resonated greatly among Chicanos in the Southwest.9

Going in a different direction while crediting González Casanova among other Latin Americanists, sociologist Michael Hechter in 1971 tentatively applied "internal colonization" to European ethnic regions, particularly the Celtic lands of the British Isles. In "Towards a Theory of Ethnic Change," he observed that prior to expansion overseas, European national states had formed by dominating surrounding lands and peoples. Indeed, France, Great Britain, and Spain—among the oldest states—had formed through such patterns of conquest: "This bears a striking resemblance to the description of internal colonialism which has emerged from consideration of the situation of Amerindian regions in several Latin American societies." Brittany, Scotland, and Granada were just a few of the lands coerced into the expanding dynastic states of Europe. Though Hechter seemed more focused on peripheral regions than peoples, he also revealed a growing interest in ethnicity. In the Americas the internally colonized groups had non-European ancestry while the colonizers were European. Hechter's peoples were all European, indicating that ethnicity alone, without racial difference, could be the dividing line between colonizer and colonized.10

Back in the southwestern United States, Chicano scholars echoed Memmi, Fanon, González Casanova, Blau ner, and especially Moore. Sociologist Tómas Almaguer's "Toward the Study of Chicano Colonialism" (1971) stated: "Mexicanos are not outsiders but are, in fact, an indigenous people of the land in question." Historian Rudolfo Acuña in his narrative Occupied America (1972) agreed that internal colonialism explained the historical situation of Mexican Americans: "the thesis of this monograph is that Chicanos in the United States are a colonized people. The conquest of the Mexicans, the occupation of their land, and the continued oppression they have faced documents this thesis." Essentially, he, as well as several Chicano political scientists, argued that their people had been defeated in the U.S./Mexican War, leaving Mexico's northern lands and barrios as the New South-

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west, a colony within the contiguous territory of the Anglo-American empire. Despite Mexican immigration into this occupied territory after the war, Anglo occupation remained the explanation for the socio-economic inequality between the two groups in the region. The stress placed on conquered territory made the argument regarding Chicanos closer to traditional colonialism than that regarding American blacks, but not so close as that concerning Native Americans.  

In the first book-length analysis of internal colonialism as applied to the United States, *Racial Oppression in America*, sociologist Robert Blauner examined Native Americans, blacks, Chicanos, Filipinos, and other Asian Americans. As advanced by Blauner, the colonized peoples were racial categories; he admitted that at this point he could not adequately analyze class within a colonial framework. Significantly, he distinguished between these colonized groups and "voluntary immigrants" (largely Europeans), though he had some difficulty categorizing Chinese and Japanese. Moreover, the theory became further detached from homeland in the sense that many of Blauner's colonized groups were not indigenous to their places of residence. Though the colonial system of slavery had brought Africans to the New World, they were no more indigenous there than were Europeans. To the degree that peoples were detached from land, the colonial concept seemed more analogy than reality. The oppression of Africans in America was like that of Indians in severity, but the former were no longer in their homelands. Comparisons that left out the key component of land stretched the colonial concept, thus opening it to the charge of theoretical  inelegance.  

Soon, other criticisms were advanced by thinkers influenced by Marx, who focused thoroughly on class. For example, in "A Critique of the Internal Colony Model" (1974), Gilbert González rejected the theory as applied to American racial minorities, by denying the status of most as "nations." Focusing on Mexican Americans, he noted that their barriers were not on contiguous territory; their territories overlapped those of other peoples, most especially those of "the legitimate and original American Indian nations." Furthermore, the model "lumps

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all strata of white society, blindly and uncritically, into one incoherent and illogical mass." Consequently, class struggle became secondary to national liberation, as oppression was seen as based on racist ideas, rather than material interests. Ignoring gender as well, internal colonialism was thus "ultimately counter-revolutionary theory."13

The critical reaction had hardly begun before Michael Hechter's full-length *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development* appeared in 1975, a book that would impact the study of European ethnic regions. Building on the analysis contained in his earlier articles, Hechter countered arguments that socioeconomic development and culture simply diffused—from England to Wales and Scotland—through assimilation due to increasing contact, such as that promoted by industrialization. According to Hechter, "the internal colonial model posits an altogether different relationship between these regions. The core is seen to dominate the periphery politically and to exploit it materially." In so doing the dominant nation incorporated ethnic peoples but created inequality that persisted or even increased, preventing assimilation and full development of the nation-state. Despite centuries of English rule, the Celtic Fringe thus remained restive, lending support to the colonial model. Nevertheless, while scholars recognized the colonized status of aborigines in the nineteenth-century reserves of interior Australia, application of that status to Celts within the core of the twentieth-century British Empire seemed inappropriate in terms of time and place.14

Also comparing theories, sociologist Edward Murguía, in his *Assimilation, Colonialism, and the Mexican American People* (1975), accepted the colonial thesis to the extent that Anglos historically dominated Mexicans in their own land, but he believed the voluntary immigration of the twentieth century predicted that more assimilation than

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14 Hechter, *Internal Colonialism*, pp. 4–5, 24, 9, 34.
decolonization would follow. Because Chicanos were subordinate numerically, and otherwise, he did not believe that they could become an equal entity in a culturally plural society, let alone become independent. Their minority status even within the Southwest made it very unlikely that they could avoid significant assimilation into Anglo-American society as they integrated socioeconomically. Because assimilation seemed a more likely prediction of the future, Murgúa implied that this model provided the clearer interpretation of the Mexican-American past, at least since 1900. Mass migration from Mexico in the late twentieth century would test these theories further.15

In European historiography, the response to the internal colonialism championed by Hechter made some headway. In examining the ways various regions of France finally integrated into the nation, Eugen Weber in Peasants into Frenchmen accepted the basic premise of domination: “conquest and colonization created it [France], as they did other realms.” Step by step the Basque region, Corsica, Alsace-Lorraine, and other territories had been pulled into the developing nation-state. Though Weber sympathized with regional life, he ultimately justified colonialism by pointing out that it could lead to voluntary assimilation: “New ways that had once seemed objectionable were now deliberately pursued and assimilated—not by a fawning ‘bourgeoisie’ or self-indulgent ‘intellectuals,’ as in Fanon’s account, but by people of all sorts who had been exposed to such ways and acquired a taste for them. Perhaps this should make us think twice about ‘colonialism’ in underdeveloped countries, which also reflects regional inequalities in development. It certainly qualifies the meaning of colonization as an internal process.” Also finding validity in the theory, Jack E. Reece in The Bretons against France stated, “This argument simply squares with what appears to be the objective reality of the situation.” In contrast to Weber, however, Reece saw ethnic nationalist movements against such colonialism as potentially “the first step in the reorganization of Europe into a continental federation of so-called little peoples.”16

Meanwhile, among Mexican-American scholars, the criticism of internal colonialism mounted. “Early efforts in this direction, while useful advances, have by and large been increasingly open to serious

criticism and further work in this area has been slowly abandoned.” Thus remarked early adherent Almaguer as he turned elsewhere in his “Interpreting Chicano History: ‘The World System’ Approach to 19th Century California” (1977). Though recognizing the nineteenth-century conquest of the Mexican borderlands, historian Mario T. García continued the Marxist attack with “Internal Colonialism: A Critical Essay” (1978): “the ‘internal colony’ theory fails to recognize the historical development of a black and Mexican working class and its integration.” 17

Nevertheless, in 1979 Mario Barrera produced Race and Class in the Southwest, the most thorough rendering of internal colonial theory as related to Chicano history. His major contribution was to factor class into the colonial analysis, thus responding to the Marxist critique. He argued that colonialism and racism derived from the material interests of elite Anglos: “it is the dominant class among the non-colonized population whose interests are served by this system.” Colonialism provided only limited advantages to the rest of whites because it inhibited their opportunities to organize along class lines. He explained that Chicanos formed subordinate segments of each class in the overall society. For example, rich Mexican Americans usually remained subordinate to rich Anglos financially, and while the former were wealthier than poor whites, poor Anglos retained the more limited advantages of racial prestige. Though Barrera barely mentioned sexual inequality, he suggested colonial theory could also include this phenomenon with class segments “based on sex.” Differing with Gilbert González and Mario García, Barrera did not believe a people needed to be a nation or territorially distinct to be colonized. 18

Despite Barrera’s book, in the 1980s the internal colonial analogy was increasingly dismissed by important Chicano historians and social scientists. In his second edition to Occupied America (1981), Acuña declared: “I have reevaluated the internal colonial model and set it aside as a useful paradigm relevant to the nineteenth century but not the twentieth.” Because ethnic Mexicans in the United States during the twentieth century were mostly individuals (and descendants) who crossed the border then, Acuña apparently came to believe that the


Mexican American War had less to do with their exploitation than did later industrial capitalism. Tomás Almaguer by 1987 had come to believe that internal colonialism had fatal flaws. In his "Ideological Distortions in Recent Chicano Historiography," he repeated that the theory still gave little attention to class, that Mexican claims to the Southwest were dubious, that Mexican Americans had ranked above and even dominated other minority groups, and that the Chicano experience of the nineteenth century did not continue into that of the twentieth. Though these assertions deserved further debate, that did not happen. Instead, internal colonialism lost much of its support, but it did not disappear.19

Despite the apparent rejection of internal colonialism in Mexican-American historiography, direct and indirect references to it persisted in work after work, suggesting its powerful hold on the interpretive imagination of Chicano historians and social scientists. Because González Casanova's original formulation, echoed by Moore, accurately applied to Chicano history, the critics could obscure the theory, but could not erase the basic facts on which it rested: the United States had conquered Mexico; Anglo-American immigrants had occupied its far northern territory, and they had dominated indigenous Mexicans. Critics complicated this situation but could not eliminate the stubborn facts. Yes, Spain had previously conquered, colonized, and dominated Indian peoples and lands; yes, Mexico had continued to subordinate Indians in its own internal colonial hierarchy of race, class, and gender; but this history did not erase the U.S. colonial cycle. Yes, Mexicans were hispanicized, but as a mestizo people, intermixed with Indians throughout Mexico. Mexicans were natives in a way the Spanish and Anglo colonizers were not. Mestizos had claims to the lands of Greater Mexico, especially through maternal lines. Yes, there were racial, class, and gender hierarchies after the U.S. conquest, but Anglos were clearly on top, even when Mexicans were not at the very bottom. Yes, most ethnic Mexicans after 1900 originated south of the new border, but the United States had conquered all Mexicans and all their later generations lost access to their national territory, not just those in what became the Southwest. Moreover, since its inception, the theory has successfully predicted continuing social inequality and conflict, espe-

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chially with respect to labor and language, in ways not applicable to most other “immigrant” groups. Internal colonial theory may not apply so neatly to ethnic Mexicans as to Navajos, but the basic elements of conquest, occupation, and domestic domination of a people and their land are present in both cases. These responses to the critics are not exceptions to the rule, weakening let alone invalidating internal colonialism, they are rather clarifications of highly complex historical phenomena that validate the theory’s broad applicability.20

Meanwhile, far from the southwestern United States, Robert J. Hind of the University of Sydney in Australia published a historiographical essay “The Internal Colonial Concept” (1984) in which he reviewed the myriad ways the idea had been applied from Israel, to South Africa, through Thailand, and within the American and European states as well. For instance, under apartheid the black majority population was confined to narrow homelands in independent South Africa with the majority of the country appropriated by the descendants of colonists from the Netherlands and Britain. Though Hind barely acknowledged the role of Chicano scholars, he did credit Mexican González Casanova with promoting the term in 1965. Hind noted a key strength of the theory: “The adaptability of the internal colonial concept, which has been related to states that once had empires and to those that were once colonies, to capitalist and to communist states, to entire political entities as well as to some of their constituent parts, as in the case of Alaska and Quebec, is incontrovertible.” But like others before him, he also noticed the weaknesses: “What the concept gains in flexibility and adaptability, its theoretical application loses in rigour.” For example, superficially assuming all precolonial societies were ideal could lead to a methodology that romanticized indigenous slave-holding in Senegambia. Moreover, “The study of imperialism, in which

that of colonialism is often grounded, or by which it is influenced, is an even more diffuse corpus of interpretative scholarship than that of colonialism." Despite listing many of the problems with the theory, Hind concluded that "the internal colonial concept is not 'totally useless,' and that it merits the consideration of historians because of its potential value as a tool of explanation." Possibly because of their pragmatic practice, few historians accepted his theoretical challenge, even as literary critics developed the broader theories of postcolonialism, and postnationalism.21

Postcolonialism

Following the various models advanced by social scientists and historians from World War II through the 1970s, literary critics discovered colonialism in general and took it in new directions that would eventually converge with the internal colonialism of Mexico and the U.S. Southwest. Palestinian-American Edward Said's Orientalism represented a new theoretical trend, seemingly unconnected to internal colonialism. A professor of English and comparative literature, Said examined the literary imagination of the West as it viewed the cultures of the Middle East. By extension, the British Empire imagined Palestine as the biblical Holy Land, leading to the view that Arabs were aliens in their homeland. According to Said, that imagination promoted imperialism: "when reduced to its simplest form. . . . There are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the latter must be dominated, which usually means having their land occupied." In the case of Palestinians this imagination led to expulsion from their homeland, or incorporation as an internal colony of the state of Israel (a state formed by settling Jews of mixed nationality who had a competing, historic claim to the country). This was a Middle Eastern version of the colonialism González Casanova had described in Mexico in the early 1960s, where mestizos impinged on indigenous lands. Said examined the way many stereotypical images of "Orientals," as benighted aristocrats or ignorant paupers, impacted reality—how Western beliefs helped rationalize and gain control of the Middle East. Orientalism challenged other scholars to see and move beyond such imagery. This work would be regarded as the foundation of post-

colonialism, a theory analyzing the human condition after imperial occupation has ended.22

The theory developed further in South Asia, far from the Mexican-American borderlands, but with certain parallels. Given its long history within the British Empire, the subcontinent produced many historians immersed in colonial questions and familiar with the social scientific literature on them. Bipan Chandra’s Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India, for example, reflected an understanding of the neocolonial and even the internal colonial concepts discussed by Latin Americanists, such as Andre Gunder Frank, even if not those by Chicano intellectuals. Marxist in background, Chandra recognized the material effects of capitalist metropolitan domination on the economic underdevelopment of colonies like India. However, the work of these historians came to be seen as elitist in light of Said’s critique of oriental stereotypes. Because these historians focused so much on the role of the colonial rich and powerful, even as they favored the undifferentiated masses, their social scientific studies failed to reflect the nationalism, conscience, or imagination of subordinated people, the “subalterns.” The tendency was to stereotype them, to orientalize them. About the same time across the globe, Chicano humanists critiqued the Anglo stereotyping of their own working-class community, even as their colleagues in the social sciences studied colonialism, class, ethnic nationalism, and similar issues discussed in India.23

In the 1980s a school of theorists and practitioners developed around Subaltern Studies, an academic journal on South Asian history and society that sought to remedy the problem of elitism, including the stereotyping of the masses as ignorant and passive. In 1982 in the journal’s introductory essay, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” editor Ranajit Guha stated the basic problem: “What . . . historical writing of this [elite] kind cannot do is explain Indian nationalism for us. For it fails to acknowledge, far less interpret, the contribution made by the people on their own, that is, independently of the elite to the making and development of this nationalism.” In general Guha was dealing with the colonial questions that Barrera had


discussed a few years earlier in Race and Class in the Southwest though
Guha was asking about consciousness, something that Barrera's more
detached social scientific approach hardly touched.24

Following more traditional Marxist thought, Barrera dealt with class
as an objective category even as he related it to race in a social hierar-
chy. Nevertheless, both he and Guha understood that hierarchy could
not be understood only in economic terms. Both understood that from
the very top an Anglo racial elite dominated society and that a second
tier of indigenous capitalists existed, largely serving the interests of the
first. Below them in the Southwest resided the middle classes and a
working class, each subdivided by race (Anglo majority over Chicano
minority), in Barrera's terms. In India where the Anglo elite was a small
minority supported by a native elite at the top, "dominant indigenous
groups. . . . At the regional and local levels" functioned as entirely native
groups with varied powers sometimes serving the elite, sometimes their
own people. The masses, or the subalterns, were the remaining groups
seemingly lacking power and voice. While Barrera was concerned with
class interests, he ventured little into class consciousness. However, for
Guha and his colleagues, this subjective area was paramount, for inves-
tigating it exposed the degree to which colonialism dominated thought
itself, that of both colonizers and colonized. Since Said had dealt with
the former, the Subaltern studies group immersed itself in the latter,
meanwhile Chicanas like Gloria Anzaldúa did the same.25

By 1988, this school of South Asian thinkers had produced enough
important work to publish Selected Subaltern Studies, edited by Guha
and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, with a foreword significantly by
Said. By this time, Said fully recognized the school he had inspired:
"this group of scholars is a self conscious part of the vast post-colonial
[my emphasis] cultural and critical effort that would include novel-
lists like Salman Rushdie, Garcia Marquez, George Lamming . . . poets
like Faiz Amad Faiz . . . philosophers like Fanon . . . and a whole host
of other figures, whose province is a post-independence world . . . still
dependent, still unfree, still dominated by coercion, the hegemony of
dictatorial regimes, derivative and hypocritical nationalisms, insuf-
ficiently critical intellectual and ideological systems." His last point
merited the most attention as these "non-Western" thinkers, includ-

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ing a Latin American, were trying to construct a new social conscious beyond the nationalism that led to independence, though one willing to accept allies in the former metropolitan centers. Recognizing the influence of Marx, Gramsci, Derrida, Foucault, Hobsbawm, and other Western thinkers, Said noted that postcolonial thinkers nevertheless sought to uncover the hidden knowledge of subaltern groups in the former colonies. In that volume historian Shahid Amin's "Gandhi as Mahatma" exemplified the new theory and method as the author read between the lines of colonial Indian newspapers to uncover numerous and varied examples of subaltern conceptions of the political and spiritual leader.26

In the introduction to Selected Subaltern Studies, coeditor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a literary critic, took the field to deeper theoretical levels. In her analysis of subaltern groups, she followed Guha's view that these include more than economic class, but also race, caste, and gender. Once again, Spivak criticized elitist thinkers, including supporters of internal colonialism: "Although some of these Western intellectuals [such as Barrera and Hechter] express genuine concern about the ravages of contemporary neo-colonialism is [sic] their own nation-states, they are not knowledgeable in the history of imperialism, in the epistemic violence." In other words the destruction done to the religions and other forms of knowledge of the colonized was ignored or misunderstood, especially the subjective knowledge of women. In her "Can the Subaltern Speak?" she commented: "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern female is even more deeply in shadow." Indeed, in terms of gender, this woman could describe imperialism and its colonial variants more graphically: "The group rape perpetrated by the conquerors is a metonymic celebration of territorial acquisition." Such thoughts would eventually echo in the works of Chicana writers, such as Vicki Ruiz's From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America (1998).27


Borderlands Theory

While these literary trends developed overseas, Chicano and Chicana creative writers and literary critics especially continued to see the world in colonial terms though usually through the borderlands history out of which Mexican-American studies had developed. Repeated, if usually implied, references were made to internal colonialism as it still offered sophisticated insights into cultural domination of peoples and regions within and across national boundaries. In 1987 Gloria Anzaldúa’s autobiographical Borderlands/La Frontera took the colonial concept in unusual directions: “I am a border woman. I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory).” She recognized the colonial subordination of her ethnic group in Texas, but she complicated the picture by focusing on the border and gender: “The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.” Anzaldúa included religion as well, making her thoughts applicable to personal borderlands from Ulster to Kashmir.

Like Barrera, Anzaldúa understood the racial and class factors involved in colonialism, and like Fanon, she understood that the social hierarchy created by colonialism had psychic effects, but she also noted how the hierarchy divided the individual spirit as the border divided the land. As a homosexual Chicana of Jewish ancestry, Anzaldúa confronted the oppression she faced within her own culture’s hierarchy because of her gender and religious background, but she did not deny the overall domination of Anglo-Americans. Rather than dismiss internal colonialism, she implied a more sophisticated version describing a pecking order of oppression that she rebelled against.

within her own psyche as well as in society. Moreover, she recognized that the Southwest, especially that part closest to the Mexican border, was not an ethnically homogeneous, colonized homeland, but one intermixed in ways that challenge, if not destroy, the coherence of any social scientific theory. An individual produced by such a border carried the mestizaje, the hybridity, resulting from colonialism with her everywhere challenging the world to make the best of it. Hybridity, less complex than Anzaldúa's, had produced such unpredictable characters as Napoleon, the Corsican caught between Italian regional and French national cultures.29

Other creative writers and literary critics would merge Anzaldúa's implicit elaboration of internal colonial theory with Said's postcolonialism. In 1991, literary critic José David Saldivar, in The Dialectics of Our America, described the environment in Anzaldúa's work in terms of conquest familiar to internal colonialism: "native Borderlands were seized and privatized by Anglos, their Texas Rangers, and their lawyers." In the same year, Sonia Saldivar-Hull wrote, "Anzaldúa makes the leap from the history of colonization by the United States to the history of colonization as a mestiza, a Native American woman. And although some Chicana critics reject the internal colony model . . . the specific history of the Tejano/Tejana urges us to remember." Saldivar-Hull agreed that Anzaldúa's work did not discard, but implicitly elaborated, internal colonialism. Alluding to Said and other postcolonial intellectuals, José David Saldivar further described the evolving colonial paradigm: "theory is now written not from a condition of critical 'distance,' but rather from a place of hybridity and betweeness in our global Borderlands composed of historically disconnected postcolonial spaces." Literary critics discarded the scientific method used to develop internal colonialism, but they continued to examine colonial concepts subjectively. As time passed, the postcolonial ideas of such literary theorists began to infiltrate Chicano history and reconnect the field more explicitly to internal colonialism.30


In 1999, Emma Pérez published *The Decolonial Imaginary*, the first book by a Chicana or Chicano historian to consider internal colonialism in light of the new approach emanating from Said's work. Significantly, she recognized the unfortunate dismissal of the earlier ideas and attempted to bridge the gap to the new material: "in the early 1970s, Rodolfo Acuña, Tomás Almaguer, Mario Barrera, and others proposed that Chicanos/as constituted a population of internally colonized people. Many Chicana/o academicians since then have resisted with knee-jerk reactions any mention of coloniality [the colonial condition], and Chicana/o social scientists have subsequently criticized the model because it does not offer empiricists an answer with solid evidence." She added, "I propose to engage coloniality's imaginary and the psychic implications with respect to material, tangible conditions."31

Essentially, Pérez accepted that ethnic Mexicans were internally colonized. They were, for example, subordinated as workers, but also as historians because they had difficulty escaping the colonizers' images of the world (the imaginary) that included the need for modern Western notions of historiographical evidence. Consequently, Mexican American historians disregarded nonwritten evidence of their indigenous origins and had failed to see the full role of women in the making of their mestizo history. As they began to decolonize, to free themselves from that psychic cage, they formed what Pérez called a decolonial imaginary, a way of seeing the world more reflective of their own multicultural heritage. A change in psychic perspective could thus ironically lead to the sort of empirical evidence Almaguer thought lacking for internal colonial theory. Inferentially, for example, by considering the Spanish conquest as the founding of their history, Chicana historians might more willingly use material, genetic (ironically, modern) evidence to prove their indigenous origins to counter traditional U.S. histories based on immigrant assimilation. However, Pérez was less interested in validating internal colonialism than in projecting an image of Chicanas beyond that oppressive condition.32

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32 Ibid., pp. 6–7, 131 n. 16; see also L. Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory*, p. 124.
**POSTNATIONALISM**

For Emma Pérez, "Ultimately, the point is to move beyond colonialist history by implementing the decolonial imaginary with a third space feminist critique to arrive finally at postcoloniality, where postnational identities may surface." Pérez recognized that Mexican-American women, who remained internally colonized, needed to imagine themselves as autonomous (decolonial) before they could move beyond their oppressed condition (to postcoloniality). They could do this by imagining themselves in a region (a mental and real space), neither Mexican nor Anglo-American, where women had achieved equality and integrity. Through such images, Chicanas could then define themselves more fully than through the national states in whose borderlands they resided. Indeed, Chicana could become a postnational identity—both Mexican and American, and more. More generally, postnationalism meant that having secured political, or at least cultural and psychic, autonomy in their homelands, former colonized groups and individuals could feel sufficiently confident to fuse their reaffirmed cultural values with those of the larger world.33

In 2000, literary critic Walter D. Mignolo, a U.S. Latino of Argentine birth and Italian ancestry, published *Local Histories/Global Designs*, an extensive discourse on the need to develop postcolonial ways of knowing. He argued that true independence for native peoples meant the recovery and evolution of their knowledge in contrast to that which empires imposed globally. (One example would be traditional usage of coca in the Aymaran homeland in Bolivia in contrast to Western prohibition of cocaine.) In passing, like Pérez, Mignolo noted the unfortunate theoretical dismissal of internal colonialism and reaffirmed its value: "In the late 1960s two Mexican sociologists [sic], Pablo González Casanova and Rodolfo Stavenhagen, proposed the concept of 'internal colonialism'... However, since the concept has been criticized... it vanished from the scene, and few will remember it as an early manifestation of postcolonial theorizing in Latin America." As we have seen, these social scientists recognized that Indians had not escaped the colonial condition after Mexico's independence. Mignolo also recognized the internally colonized status of Chicanos, particularly in the con-

quered Mexican borderlands: “in the nineteenth century, the United States frontier moved south and circled a large Mexican population within U.S. territory. In the twentieth century, particularly in the past thirty years, massive migration from Mexico is generating, within the United States, a type of intellectual who thinks in the border.” Following Anzaldúa, he argued the colonized condition of Chicanos had forced them to develop “border thinking,” the kind of localized bicultural epistemology that Mignolo expected to challenge the imperial hegemony of standard English and other global knowledge. In his work Mignolo thus demonstrated that internal colonialism was not only a viable theory, but integral to the postcolonial and postnational theories developed by the twenty-first century.34

In 2003 an early critic of internal colonialism, historian Gilbert González, continued with a neo-Marxist critique of it and other colonial and postnational theories in A Century of Chicano History, coauthored with Raúl Fernández: “a rhetorical disparaging of nation-states . . . is au courant in the historical discourse. The increasing uselessness of nation states is emphasized: the nation-state becomes increasingly irrelevant as intellectuals ‘nullify borders,’ apparently and simply, by crossing them (!), and migrants continually ‘defy and ignore’ the two nation-states by establishing their own ‘third space.’” González and Fernández argued powerfully that the states were all too real; indeed the relationship of the United States toward Mexico was imperial, both politically and economically, the North American Free Trade Agreement exemplifying that fact. Interestingly, in critiquing the “third-space” theme, these historians surprisingly reversed González’s earlier views of internal colonialism as reactionary, “there was something positive about the earlier notions of ‘internal colony,’ ‘oppressed nation,’ and ‘Aztlan.’ At least they presumed to be in opposition and a challenge to the status quo. It is not clear whether the ‘third space’ issues a political challenge or whether it is a descriptive representation of the contemporary ethnic Mexican community.” Unfortunately, González and Fernández reacted to only a fraction of the evolving postcolonial and postnational literature bearing on historical issues.35


Continuing the critique, González and Fernández attacked the very foundations of Mexican-American history: "The notion that Chicano history begins with the conquest of 1848 is a common thread running through the majority of works in Chicano history." González and Fernández rejected this "nearly unanimously" held periodization, curiously in favor of an immigrant model similar to that believed before the Chicano movement: "massive economic transformations of the Southwest created a great demand for cheap, unskilled labor, which was met by a tremendous migration from Mexico beginning at about the turn of the twentieth century." In advancing this movement as the start of Chicano history, the co-authors again challenged the foundations of internal colonialism that rested on conquest of land and people. Instead, they advanced an imperialist model that González repeated in his *Culture of Empire* (2004): "empire-making—the economic conquest of Mexico and the consequent migration of Mexicans," as central to the historiography of the United States, Chicanos, and Latinos. Following a narrow focus on industrialization, these historians dismissed the early nineteenth-century U.S. commercial expansion into Mexico, the actual military conquest of 1848, and the loss of land and natural resources, all factors establishing the economic foundations of the twentieth century. Their cogent argument regarding the twentieth-century American empire would be even more so if they advanced the developments of the earlier century as the first phase of an imperialism that others have called colonialism, including its internal variant.36

Recognizing imperialism or colonialism in all its varieties has more than historiographical importance; it has political significance for the future. It forces thinkers, activists, politicians, and others to imagine a more egalitarian postcolonial and postnational world. Moreover, it helps create that world. In "Postnationalist Identities: A New Configuration," Irish philosopher and public intellectual Richard Kearney notes, "it is now commonplace for people to lay claim to a model of multiple identity, extending from subnational categories of region, province, or county to transnational categories such as the EU or UN." Seeking to end the internal colonialism Michael Hechter had described in 1975, Great Britain had devolved governance from London by establishing assemblies in Wales, Scotland, and other ethnic regions, including Northern Ireland. But more significant was "the

Good Friday Agreement of 1998—declaring that the citizens of Northern Ireland could be 'British or Irish or both.'” People in that third space, that borderland between two nation-states, now had access to citizenship reflective of territories in intersecting, rather than in the “commonplace” concentric configuration described by Kearney. Moreover, choice of citizenship permitted more freedom concerning divorce and civil union, issues of gender affected by the state and its territorial jurisdiction. The agreement was one example of a postnational pattern allowing for individuals to align their subjective loyalties with their objective rights and responsibilities across more open boundaries. Such patterns were evolving elsewhere, including Mexico which permitted dual nationality in response to the loss of many of its citizens to the United States.37

As we have seen, in 1975 Edward Murguía suspected that internal colonialism would fail to predict the future as ethnic Mexicans assimilated, but mass migration in the intervening decades continued to place his view in doubt. Certainly, the large numbers of “illegal immigrants” (a status fundamentally resulting from the conquest, treaty, and borders of 1848) continued to support Barrera’s description of colonial labor, even as their opponents profiled ethnic Mexicans racially, attacking their language and customs as well. In reaction to such oppression, in the 1990s growing Latino solidarity in California helped swing the state from conservative to liberal, increasing the numbers of elected Mexican Americans dramatically. Elsewhere similar developments seemed likely to follow the massive pro-immigrant marches of 2006. These seemed likely to lead to the more open borders Mexican workers and U.S. businesses demanded, freeing a significant part of a transnational working class. With the distinct possibility that Latinos would eventually achieve majorities demographically in such large border states as California and Texas, attempts to make Spanish equal with English in civic affairs might succeed, as Latinos cast off cultural colonialism, moving toward the Quebec model. As the pan-Latino middle and upper classes developed, postnational attitudes could increase through greater education and global exposure, allowing for greater interethic cooperation domestically. Though internal colonialism helps predict such ethnic

political outcomes, economic questions remain murkier. Nevertheless, the theory fits readily into the broader colonial paradigm, potentially including the imperialism that González and Fernández analyze, addressing more directly the relations between the United States and Mexico, in the context of the capitalist global economy.38

Conclusion

Understood as a subset of the colonial paradigm, including formal colonialism, neocolonialism, postcolonialism, borderlands theory, and postnationalism, internal colonialism remains a viable theory. To summarize, this theory, compared with its relatives, more fully explains the workings of colonialism within national borders; more importantly, it explains in clearer ways the unequal position of indigenous and mestizo peoples than do theories based primarily on class, assimilation, diffusion, immigration, and the like. As most of the works we have considered suggest, when class, gender, multiple ethnic groups, and individual subjectivity are factored in, they do not weaken, but strengthen, internal colonial theory. As in the case of Mexican "illegal aliens" in the Southwest, further application of this theory would help develop more realistic policies to resolve ethnic conflict in places as diverse as Nunavik in Canada, Western Sahara in Morocco, Chechnya in Russia, or Tibet in China.39

The historical interpretations of colonialism help us understand not only the past but the present and future of ethnic groups within and between national states. In a world where force continues to assure the dominance of some nations, classes, and sexes over others, recognizing the systemic causes of inequality from the individual, through the regional, between the national, to the global helps us to solve the problems and provides a map to a more egalitarian and peaceful world. In that light, internal colonialism deserves further application by historians and other scholars, to say the least.40

