

## Mexican Americans and the Race Question<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper addresses the long-standing question of whether Mexican Americans are best understood as an “immigrant ethnic group” or as a “racialized minority” in U.S. society. The paper claims that Mexican Americans are certainly an immigrant ethnic group, but the question is whether they are, *in addition*, a racialized minority. Using a framework developed by Hayward (2013), the paper presents a variety of evidence to suggest that Mexican Americans – both in the past and the present – continue to be targets of racializing *narratives* stigmatizing group members as “unassimilated foreigners” not capable of equal citizenship in the U.S. polity, and that a variety of *structural* supports (*institutions* and *racialized spaces*) continue to work to keep Mexican Americans near the bottom of the U.S. ethnoracial order. The paper closes with an appeal to political scientists to use the widest possible scope of research methods to address the question of racialization in a more fully developed manner.

This paper seeks to enter a long-standing and complex discussion that has important political and public policy implications. The central question in the discussion: are Mexican Americans – *Chicanos* – best understood as a *racialized U.S. minority group*, or are they better understood as an *ethnic immigrant group* making its way into and up the U.S. ladder of immigrant incorporation as have previous immigrant groups? Or, are there other – and better – alternative understandings of Mexican Americans’ place in the U.S. ethno-racial order?

At the outset, it is important to be clear that this essay is *not* asking whether Mexican Americans are a “racial” group as opposed to an “ethnic” group. Since there is near consensus among contemporary social scientists that human races do not exist in nature, and that, to the extent they exist in human societies, “races” are social constructs, trying to determine whether Mexican Americans are a racial group is a pointless enterprise. The question asked here is whether Chicanos have experienced significant *racialization* in the

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United States. Are Mexican Americans a racialized minority group in U.S. society and politics?

There are many who answer in the negative, among social scientists, as well as among political analysts and advocates on both the right and left of the U.S. political spectrum. Similarly, there are many social scientists and political activists who argue that yes, indeed, Mexican Americans have been racialized in important ways in both their historical “home base” of the U.S. southwest, as well as in “new destination” states where large numbers of Mexican immigrants have settled in more recent decades.

This convoluted disagreement cannot, obviously, be resolved in one conference paper. Rather, after sketching out aspects of the argument for viewing Mexican Americans as a non-racialized ethnic immigrant group, I will turn to the case for viewing Chicanos as a racialized minority group in the U.S. ethno-racial order. Most of the paper will lay out reasons for taking the racialization argument seriously, and as a result, I will close with the suggestion that political scientists need to improve our investigation of the political consequences of Mexican American racialization by moving toward a more eclectic set of research methods.

### **Seeing Mexican Americans as an Immigrant Ethnic Group.**

There are many good reasons for viewing Mexican Americans as an immigrant ethnic group. With a population expanding rapidly through more than four decades of large-scale immigration to the U.S., most of the Mexican Americans who have ever lived in the United States are alive today, and a majority of them are from immigrant families (that is, first or second generation in the U.S.). The fact that they are a *national-origin* group is one reason – in itself – to understand Mexican Americans as an immigrant ethnic group, since this is one of the primary criteria for defining an ethnic group among U.S. scholars. Moreover, the fact that the U.S. Census has – for at least five decades – classified Mexican Americans as a sub-set of the “Hispanic” pan-ethnic group, rather than as a “racial” group, lends official credence to this interpretation. In this sense, there is no question that Mexican Americans are an “immigrant ethnic group,” and there is really no disagreement about this. Mexican Americans are by definition a national origin group, hence an ethnic group, and most in the extant group are immigrants. The disagreement comes as to whether Mexican Americans – *in addition* to being an immigrant ethnic group – are also a

*racialized minority* in the U.S. ethnoracial order. The remainder of this paper will be an exploration of the hypothesis that Mexican Americans are, indeed, a racialized minority community. This poses the question of what is meant by racialization.

### **Understanding Racialization.**

Despite the contemporary scholarly consensus that races do not exist in nature, during the roughly three centuries prior to the mid-twentieth century the idea of separate human races expressed the core belief in the United States that because different peoples “looked” to be different from each other, those phenotypical variations in appearance signified *essential* and *relatively fixed differences* embodying characteristics typical of the individuals belonging to the differing groups. Moreover, the personal characteristics associated with the idea of race invariably have included *invidious comparisons* regarding the moral virtue, character, human excellence, practices and behavior, and/or inherent abilities of the groups being designated as racially different. Invariably, “our” (dominant) race is superior – morally, culturally, and/or physically – to “their” (subordinate) race. Put differently, as Frederickson has emphasized, *race* does not emerge as a social construction in human discourse until it appears in conjunction with *racism* (Frederickson 2002).

It is the inevitable pairing of *racism* with the idea of race that requires the parenthetical modifiers (*dominant* and *subordinate*) in the previous paragraph. For as Frederickson also emphasizes, racism always has “two components: *difference* and *power*” (Frederickson, 2002: 9). The idea of separate human races emerged among dominant groups to justify their exercise of *power* to subordinate and/or exclude those groups being defined as racially *different*. In this writer’s understanding,<sup>1</sup> *racialization* refers to the processes of social construction that simultaneously stigmatize people as racially “other” while also functioning to subordinate and/or exclude those so defined.

Accordingly, to say that a group has been, or is being, *racialized* means that a dominant group, *invoking* physical appearance as one boundary marker, has stigmatized a targeted group as “racially” different and employed its control over resources to *subordinate* and/or *exclude* members of the targeted group from equal membership in the polity and society. To undertake an assessment of whether a specific group, such as Mexican Americans, is a racialized group, therefore, requires engaging in an investigation of social processes of stigmatization, subordination, and exclusion in relation to that

targeted group. Because we are speaking here of *processes* and not *categories*, my assumption is that there will always be room for interpretation and dispute when it comes to discerning an answer to the question of racialization in relation to any group. That is, because we are dealing with social processes here, our answers to the question of whether or not a particular group has been “racialized” necessarily will be in the form of “more” or “less,” rather than categorically “yes” or “no.”

### **Historical Context and the Racialization Narrative: Conquest, Annexation, and Domination/Exclusion.**

The relationship between any social group and the larger society always exists in a specific social and political context. The way this context is understood powerfully shapes our views on whether or not a particular group is racialized. That is certainly the case with Mexican Americans, for whom two vastly different narratives of the context for understanding the group’s place in the U.S. social order have competed for at least fifty years. We’ve already referenced the perspective that places Mexican Americans in the narrative of the U.S. as a “nation of immigrants,” with this group simply being the largest and, in many ways the most recent, group to make its way to the U.S. in order to improve its collective lives and those of its children. The alternative, racialization narrative to be explored here begins with a very different understanding of the historical context for the place of Mexican Americans in the U.S. ethno-racial order.

The racialization historical narrative, which had its greatest influence during the Chicano Movement period of the 1960s-1970s, takes its bearings from the formative period in which Mexican Americans first acquired U.S. national identity.<sup>2</sup> The seminal event in this narrative was the U.S. war with Mexico (1846-48), fomented by American southern politicians (led by President Polk) seeking more territory for slaveholders, and which resulted in an invasion of Mexico City before Mexico surrendered over half of its territory in return for some \$15M. While the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) declared that all Mexican citizens remaining in the territory ceded to the United States would be U.S. citizens, the actual *practice* of citizenship was mostly in the hands of state governments, and very quickly the vast majority of former Mexican citizens were excluded from the equal practice of citizenship (Garcia Bedolla 2009; Menchaca 2001). Moreover, as numerous historical studies have demonstrated, land ownership in the newly acquired territory quickly shifted

from Mexican-origin to Anglo hands through a variety of means that advantaged those familiar with Anglo American legal and landownership practices. A few formerly Mexican elites managed to stave off being downgraded and excluded for a period of time, but most succumbed to a stigmatized and subordinate status within one generation.

Meanwhile, the lower classes of Mexican Americans were quickly relegated to a dominated and excluded position within the social order of the southwestern U.S. By the time that significant numbers of Mexicans began migrating northward to the U.S., especially in the aftermath of the chaotic violence of the 1910 Mexican Revolution, a pattern of racialized domination and exclusion had been established throughout the region, albeit with localized variations. This pattern had certain similarities with the pattern of racialization that afflicted African Americans in the American south in the post-Civil War period of Jim Crow.

Economically, for example, most Mexican-origin people in the southwest were integrated into a *racially segmented system of labor* in the southwest – in agriculture, ranching, mining, construction, among other occupations – in which they were routinely assigned to the lowest status jobs that paid the least, and in which employers routinely worked to flood and/or constrict the labor market through managed migration to keep wages and job security at the lowest possible levels (Barrera 1979). Buttressing this economic domination/exclusion was the systematic, though mostly extralegal, *residential and social segregation* of Mexican Americans into urban *barrios* and rural *colonias* that insured that most were spatially separated from opportunities for integration and most avenues of social mobility. This residential segregation was maintained by widespread anti-Mexican discrimination in both the sale and rental of housing, as well as in the mortgage industry. In addition to housing patterns, a plethora of other institutions routinely maintained (mostly) extralegal, though rigidly enforced, rules of segregation as late as the early 1960s, including public schools; public recreational facilities (e.g., parks, playgrounds, swimming pools and beaches); movie theaters, some restaurants, bars and hotels, etc.; and police harassment of Mexican Americans found outside “their” parts of town.

These patterns of subordination and exclusion were enforced systematically by anti-Mexican *violence and the threat of violence*, as well as through the coercive power of the

state. Mexican Americans seeking to integrate segregated public facilities, for example, were frequently “run off” by the police, as were Mexican American workers seeking employment in venues not open to them as well as workers seeking better wages and working conditions through collective action. Private vigilante groups – ranging from growers groups in agricultural areas to white sailors and soldiers in L.A. during World War II’s “zoot suit riots,” and even chapters of the Ku Klux Klan in the nativist post-World War I period – terrorized Mexican *barrios* and *colonias* on numerous occasions that have been documented. And racist lynching also afflicted Mexican Americans throughout the southwest, as we have recently been reminded (Carrigan and Webb 2013, 2015; Delgado 2009). As in the case of African Americans, these uses of racial violence functioned as powerful deterrents to egalitarian efforts on the part of Mexican Americans throughout the southwestern region.

These institutional and social forces of conquest, domination and exclusion were intertwined with, and reinforced by, widespread Anglo American discursive practices of disparagement and suppression of Mexican American identity and cultural practices. Mexican cultural practices were publicly despised and suppressed, including the Spanish language, religious beliefs and rituals, family-centered ethical beliefs, etc. Mexican identity was targeted with a long list of racial slurs and epithets, and Mexicans were routinely stigmatized with negative stereotypes in the public media, by Anglo academics, as well as in everyday social discourse. In sum, in this racialization narrative of the Mexican American experience, a combination of actions taken by Anglo victors in the aftermath of the defeat of Mexico in 1848 led to racialized patterns of domination and exclusion, as well as stigmatization, that effectively prevented most members of this group from integration, social mobility and the practice of equal citizenship well into the middle of the twentieth century.

### **Mexican Americans in the Contemporary Period.**

Given this historical narrative of conquest, annexation, and racialized domination/exclusion, how are we to understand the subsequent period – leading to the present – of Mexican American history, a period during which a truly significant number of Mexican immigrants came to the United States and fundamentally altered the demographic makeup of the U.S. population?

Certainly there were concerted efforts for social and political mobility among Mexican Americans that bore fruit in subsequent decades. The 1960s witnessed the first significant cohorts of Mexican Americans to attend colleges and universities throughout the southwest, and the politicization of many of these students in the Chicano Movement was directed largely toward overcoming the patterns of racialized domination and exclusion sketched above through direct confrontation and opposition (see, e.g., Muñoz 1989). While the Chicano Movement's political impact had waned by the mid-1970s, the creation of Chicano Studies programs on college and university campuses remains a lasting institutional monument to that movement. Moreover, for at least a couple of generations, affirmative action programs on college and university campuses – strongly supported by activists among the students already on campuses – led to significant increases in the numbers of Mexican Americans gaining college degrees.

In turn, an increasing cadre of Mexican American college graduates (as well as protections against ethno-racial discrimination based in the Civil Rights Act of 1964) led to growing numbers of Mexican Americans employed in “middle class” and professional occupations such as teaching, law, higher education, engineering, real estate, corporate middle management, government careers, medicine, sales, the media, etc. In addition, tens of thousands of Mexican American entrepreneurs initiated a wide range of small and medium-sized businesses, many of which were successful. Meanwhile, increased voter registration and turnout – stimulated and facilitated by Latino political organizations and the 1975 inclusion of Hispanics in Voting Rights Act coverage – led to the election of unprecedented numbers of Mexican Americans to public office. Similar to the experience of the African American population, in short, the decades since the 1960s have witnessed an impressive increase in the size of the Mexican American middle class and an equally significant boost in the political presence and power of Mexican Americans.

At the same time, and also similar to the U.S. black population, Mexican Americans as a whole remain greatly disadvantaged relative to the Anglo/white population in relation to a wide range of indicators of “success” in American society, including, e.g., income, wealth, educational attainment, crime victimization, neighborhood amenities, occupational and social prestige, access to social mobility, etc. (see, e.g., Kochhar and Fry 2014; National Urban League 2015). Moreover, while considerable numbers of Mexican Americans have

been incorporated into the U.S. political process and government structures of decision-making, this group remains among the most under-represented of all social identity groups in U.S. politics (see, e.g., Affigne et al. 2014; García Bedolla 2014; Shaw et al. 2015).

The persistence of a socio-economic and political hierarchy that positions Mexican Americans at or near the lowest levels of the American social order raises the question of whether, and how, racialization is a meaningful and credible explanation for this phenomenon. A sizable group of scholars, as well as much of the American public, believes that there are no “racial” barriers to full incorporation and equal membership for Mexican Americans. Those who proffer this group interpretation (see, e.g., Chavez 1991; Skerry 1993; Alba and Nee 2003; Citrin and Sears 2014) account for the persistent disadvantaged location of the group in the American social order as deriving from the recent immigrant status of a large proportion of the group, perceiving a continuing and incomplete assimilative adaptation to U.S. cultural norms. Some of these commentators stress, as well, the “illegal” status of many group members who have arrived in the U.S. without authorization. Despite the long history of Mexican American experience in the U.S., this interpretation depicts them as “recent” immigrants who can and will adapt successfully to U.S. society so long as their own group leaders and misguided intellectuals do not erect roadblocks by asking Mexican Americans to think of themselves as a racialized minority. My aim here is not to directly refute these claims, but to undertake a kind of analytic experiment in which I sketch out a way of understanding racialization as a major force in maintaining a subordinate and excluded position for Mexican Americans in the U.S. ethnoracial order.

### **Of Stories, Institutions, and Places.**

The framework loosely deployed here was developed by Clarissa Rile Hayward (2013) in relation to the dominant black-white binary of U.S. racial formation. The central question she takes up in her book is why – some seventy years after the idea of separate human races was thoroughly discredited scientifically, intellectually, and militarily – do Americans continue to have racialized identities and to live racialized lives that reinforce racial hierarchy? In critiquing the widely-held notion that our collective identities are created and replicated primarily through *identity stories* – narratives – that continue to depict races as “real,” even though we are aware that the idea of separate races is a “bad



story,” Hayward develops a more complex account. Her account claims that “bad stories” of collective identity gain considerable “staying power” through being *institutionalized* in laws and organizational behavior, and by being *objectified* in the creation of racialized physical spaces or neighborhoods. In that we live our lives in these institutionalized and objectified racialized spaces, we learn to behave in racialized ways and to take what we have learned through practical experience as “common sense” reality. That is, at a corporeal and practical level, we “know” that races exist because that is our lived experience. Moreover, the understanding of racial difference that is embedded in these understandings is an inherently *hierarchical* understanding as per the conception of racialization sketched above. The result is strong reinforcement for racialized inequalities that have persistent staying power despite our awareness of the “myth of race.”

My intent is to loosely use this framework for exploring the degrees to which, and the ways in which, Mexican American racialization exists in narratives being told in the contemporary period, the degree to which those narratives have been *institutionalized*, and the extent to which such narrative institutionalization has led to their *objectivization* through the creation of “*Mexican spaces*” that result in a “common sense” lived reality of racialized identity and racial hierarchy for Mexican Americans. To the extent that this does occur, I want to argue, to that extent Mexican Americans can be understood as a racialized group in the U.S. ethnoracial order.

### **Racialization Stories of Mexican Americans.**

Are narratives deployed to construct Mexican Americans as a “racial” group in the sense that group members are described as “visibly different” than prototypical Americans, and with relatively fixed characteristics that are stigmatized and disparaged, leading to their subordination and exclusion from full and equal membership in the “American” population? Certainly there is abundant evidence that Mexican Americans have been described in these terms since their formal incorporation into U.S. citizenship in 1848. The oft-reprinted quotation initiating this derogatory descriptive line is that from Senator John C. Calhoun (D-South Carolina) who expressed this view in 1848 in opposing the annexation of Mexico at the conclusion of the U.S. war against that country:

I know further, sir, that we have never dreamt of incorporating into our Union any but the Caucasian race – the free white race. To incorporate

Mexico would be the very first instance of the kind of incorporating an Indian race; for more than half of the Mexicans are Indians, and the other is composed chiefly of mixed tribes. I protest against such a union as that! Ours, sir, is the Government of a white race. . . (John C. Calhoun, 1848, quoted in García Bedolla 2009: 39)

As noted above, in the years following 1848, Mexican Americans were subjected to a long list of despicable epithets and characterizations that questioned their fitness for equal membership in the U.S. polity. It is important to note here that these racial stories fit both dimensions of Kim's (2000) analytic scheme for making sense of U.S. racialization. In analyzing Korean and African American racialization in New York City, Kim suggests there are two dimensions or axes to U.S. racialization used to construct the U.S. racial hierarchy: *superior vs. inferior* and *insider vs. foreigner*. Thus, one dimension characterizes Blacks (in particular) as racially *inferior* to the white population in regard to intellectual, moral, and cultural excellence, whereas the other dimension characterizes Korean Americans (and other Asian Americans) as inherently *foreign* in relation to being American. African Americans, Kim says, are typically not seen as inherently foreign, and Asian Americans are typically not seen as inherently inferior, at least in the contemporary era, but both groups are racially "triangulated" in a way that leaves the white population on top of the U.S. racial hierarchy.

What is striking in this context is that Mexican Americans – from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the present – have been constructed as both *inherently inferior* and *inherently foreign*. On the one hand, Mexican Americans have been represented in street-level narratives, as well as in academic studies, as comparatively unintelligent, unambitious, unclean, lazy, childlike and simplistic, superstitious, passive, sneaky and devious, dangerous and violent, untrustworthy, prone to criminality and gangsterism, amoral, sexually promiscuous, sexual predators, prone to substance abuse, unpatriotic, etc., etc. (for a classic critique, see the literature review by Octavio Romano-V in the introductory issues of *El Grito*, 1968). In short, a whole range of characterizations – many of them in contradiction with each other, but all of them characteristics undesirable in "good Americans" – have been attributed to Mexican Americans as part of their relatively fixed character.<sup>3</sup>

In recent decades, when open declarations of “racial” inferiority have become unacceptable in most social circles, it is relatively less common to see or hear such sweeping negative characterizations of Mexican Americans as such. However, the second dimension of the racialization narrative – that of *inherent foreignness* – has enabled those deploying racialization stories to perpetuate highly negative characterizations of Mexican Americans through a widespread conflation of negative stereotypes about Mexican Americans with those of “illegal aliens.” The claim frequently expressed during the Mexican American War that Mexicans were an inassimilable population initiates this trope and it continues to the present day (see, e.g., Horsman 1981 for the Mexican American War period, and Schrag 2010 for the contemporary period). Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s influential characterization of nations as “imagined communities,” Chavez articulates the central theme as follows: “. . . the Latino Threat Narrative does not imagine Latinos, whether immigrants or U.S.-born, as part of the national community. When they do enter the social imaginary, however, it is as an internal threat to the larger community” (Chavez 2008: 42). The point I want to emphasize is that this narrative of “forever foreign” has been deployed consistently in reference to Mexican Americans for over a century in a way that also stigmatizes the group as being “less than” fit for equal membership in the U.S. polity.

Fox’s (2012) analysis of social welfare policy implementation during the decades leading up to World War II, for example, demonstrates that, while immigrant white women were given various forms of “relief” because they were expected to be assimilated into the white American population, that was not true of women of color: black women were excluded from relief programs in the South because they were seen as racially undeserving, and Mexican-origin women were excluded from relief programs because they were described and defined as transitory foreigners who were expected to return to Mexico.

Similarly, in her path-breaking study of the creation of the “illegal immigrant” in the first half of the twentieth century, Ngai (2004) shows that this demeaning designation was specifically and primarily applied to the Mexican migrant population from the early twentieth century. The 1924 immigration reform law that established the infamous national-origin quota system for U.S. immigration permits involved “. . . processes of territorial redefinition and administrative enforcement [that] informed *divergent paths of immigrant racialization*”:

Europeans and Canadians tended to be disassociated from the real and imagined category of illegal alien, which facilitated their national and racial assimilation as white American citizens. In contrast, Mexicans emerged as iconic illegal aliens. Illegal status became constitutive of a racialized Mexican identity and of Mexicans' exclusion from the national community and polity. (Ngai, 2004: 58; emphasis added).

Despite the fact that the Western Hemisphere (including Mexico) was excluded from the national-origins quota system adopted by Congress in 1924, Mexican migrants became the iconic illegal aliens because of the racialization of Mexican-origin Americans generally, and the racialized manner in which the U.S. border was policed during much of the twentieth century. The U.S. border patrol worked with U.S. employers (especially in agriculture, railroads, and mining) to ensure employer access to suitably large "pools" of workers during times of employer need, while also facilitating the "round-up" and deportation of Mexican workers when employer needs lessened (Barrera 1979).

Again, Ngai recounts some of the most extreme instances of this process. During the early years of the Great Depression, for example, "nearly 20 percent of the Mexican population in the United States [was] returned to Mexico . . . . The repatriation of Mexicans was a racial expulsion program exceeded in scale only by the Native American removals of the nineteenth century" (Ngai 2004: 75). Similarly, in 1953-55, the border patrol launched "Operation Wetback" to rid the country of over 800,000 unauthorized migrants, although both before and after that operation the agency used its flexible "carrot and stick" approach modulated in relation to employer needs (Ngai 2004: Chapter 4).

As narrated by Ngai, the racialized conflation of "wetback" unauthorized migrants with Mexican-origin people generally was commonplace throughout the period from the 1930s into the 1960s: "the construction of the 'wetback' as a dangerous and criminal social pathogen fed the general racial stereotype 'Mexican' (Ngai 2004: 149). While hundreds of thousands of European "illegal immigrants" (from Italy, Poland, and elsewhere in Europe) had their legal status resolved through administrative discretion, a whole different story of racialization emerged along the U.S.-Mexican border:

By contrast, walking (or wading) across the border emerged as the quintessential act of illegal immigration, the outermost point in a relativist ordering of illegal immigration. The method of Mexicans' illegal entry could thus be perceived as "criminal" and Mexican immigrants as undeserving of

relief. Combined with the construction of Mexicans as migratory agricultural laborers (both legal and illegal) in the 1940s and 1950s, that perception gave powerful sway to the notion that Mexicans had no rightful presence on United States territory, no rightful claim of belonging. (Ngai 2004: 89).

Other studies have shown how this process of conflating Mexican-origin migrants with Mexican Americans generally has continued into the contemporary era of the early twenty-first century. Scholars who deny that Mexican Americans are a racialized minority group often suggest that discrimination and stigmatization experienced by group members occurs only among recent immigrants, and that later generations are successfully assimilating into the general (white) “American” population. Jimenez’ (2010) study of Mexican Americans with multiple generational histories as U.S. citizens in Santa Maria, California, and in Garden City, Kansas, however, found that a constant flow of new immigrants from Mexico acts to “replenish” the ethnic solidarity of his respondents, marking off the integration experiences of Mexican Americans from other immigrant communities in the United States. And in the stories of his respondents, the steady influx of immigrants generated experiences of racialized identity, as other Americans often took it for granted that these multi-generation Americans were “foreigners” who didn’t really belong as members of the national community. As Jimenez summarized the point after analyzing his respondents’ reflections on their experiences of ethnicity:

For Mexican Americans, these ethnic boundaries remain brightly drawn because of the presence of a large immigrant population. The people I interviewed regularly encountered the sharp edges of these boundaries when they ran into nativism directed at immigrants. Whether witnessed in interpersonal interactions or in highly visible public displays, Mexican Americans run into a racialized form of nativism that attributes discontent about immigration to all people of Mexican descent, not just immigrants. (Jimenez 2010: 251).

In short, because Mexican Americans are conflated with “illegal immigrants” in these contemporary narratives, it is common to see widespread attributions of negative characteristics of Mexican Americans as *both foreign* and *inferior* along multiple dimensions. Websites and blogs expressing concerns about Mexican immigration, for example, contain frequent “comments” from members of the web-reading public claiming that not only do “Mexicans”/“illegals” refuse to assimilate through speaking only English in

“America,” they are also located in this country for the express purpose of preying on an innocent “American” public through criminal activities, social policy dependency, and undeserved birthright citizenship. Many of the negative stereotypes listed above in reference to the Mexican American population continue to be deployed in these web commentaries through the channel of inherent foreignness.

These racialized stories of inherent inferiority and foreignness are told and re-told in a variety of settings and through a multitude of transmission media in addition to the internet, ranging from families to work cohorts to public media to scholarly studies. An excellent recent example of the latter is the work of Samuel Huntington (2004), who contributed directly to the perpetuation of Mexican American racialization stories by adding his scholarly prestige to the “forever foreign” narrative. Despite his disavowal of a racial basis for U.S. national identity in the contemporary period, by falsely claiming that Mexican Americans have demonstrated a long-term refusal to assimilate to U.S. English and to U.S. social and political norms, and have thereby formed a kind of “fifth column” opposition to U.S. national loyalty, Huntington broadcasts the fear that Mexican Americans threaten a fundamental division of the country into two competing nations. Huntington’s work on this subject has been thoroughly critiqued by a number of scholars with a much better understanding of U.S. history and a much better grasp of the relevant empirical data on the acculturation and national loyalties of Mexican Americans than he had. The point here, however, is that Huntington’s influential characterization of Mexican Americans as fundamentally “foreign” is in full accord with a long history of racialized stories about Mexican Americans.

Other scholars have analyzed the ways in which public media have perpetuated stigmatizing and false stereotypes about Mexican Americans that contribute materially to the racialization narrative. Santa Ana, in particular, has published very insightful and rigorous analyses of both newspaper accounts (2002) and television network news stories (2013) that perpetuate racialization narratives of Mexican Americans and other Latinos. Chavez (2008) has also made a similar critical analysis of the public media’s role in the construction and deployment of “the Latino threat” narrative. Thus, despite the fact that we have known for generations that races do not exist in nature, there is abundant evidence

that a powerful racialization narrative continues to adhere to Mexican Americans in the contemporary period.

### **Structural Racialization of Mexican Americans: Institutions and Spaces.**

As noted above, Hayward (2013) argues that racialization narratives can be told and re-told, but that such stories are likely to die if they are not credible factually or if they are out of alignment with core American values, *but that they can be given staying power through the structural supports of institutionalization and objectification in public spaces.* *Institutions* (such as laws, rules, organizations) structure the actions of individuals by establishing and enforcing rules and collective “habits” of behavior that provide the social pathways and networks through which we interact, perform our social roles, conduct our business, act politically, and so on. Institutional rules and “habits,” however, become the backdrop for our daily lives, and though they structure myriad advantages and disadvantages between individuals and social groups, precisely because they are a backdrop for our daily lives we are typically unaware of these cumulative effects or the decisions that led to them. These institutions, in turn, also establish the rules and provide the resources through which *physical spaces* (e.g., buildings, neighborhoods, public parks and playgrounds, shopping areas, boundaries between city zones and between cities and suburbs, freeways and roads, transit systems) are constructed, and these material objectifications also constitute key parts of the backdrop for our daily lives, shaping our behaviors, understandings and expectations in ways equally unnoticed by us as we interact in myriad ways.

In Hayward’s (2013) analysis of Columbus, Ohio, the highly racialized spaces created through the institutionalization and objectification of racial narratives become self-reinforcing backgrounds, or “frames,” within which both black and white Americans *live* racialized lives that corporeally inform racial identity stories as “common sense.” The segregation of white people in (mostly) white neighborhoods and suburbs, she concludes, constitutes a form of racial white privilege that is built through public policies that use public authority and public investments to construct and advantage highly exclusive and “private” white spaces in ways that are unrecognized by those who benefit from them (e.g., “I don’t see race”; “my racial identity isn’t relevant to my life story”). African Americans, meanwhile, tend to live in highly racialized and segregated neighborhoods built through

exclusionary policies that resulted in concentrated poverty, a long list of social problems, and systematic disinvestment by public and private entities.

Lipsitz (2011) has made a similar, though more broadly framed, characterization of how racism is enacted through racialized spaces: “One reason racialized space goes largely unnoticed is that it has been produced by . . . [a] long history. . . ” Continuing, he summarizes:

Racialized space has come to be seen as natural in this nation. Spatial control, displacement, dispossession, and exclusion have been linked to racial subordination and exploitation in decisive ways. From the theft of Native American and Mexican lands in the nineteenth century to the confiscation of Black and Latino property for urban renewal projects in the twentieth century, from the Trail of Tears to the Japanese Internment, from the creation of ghettos, barrios, reservations, and “Chinatowns” to the disproportionate placement of toxic hazards in minority neighborhoods, the racial projects of U.S. society have always been spatial projects as well. (Lipsitz 2011: 52)

As noted above, Mexican Americans have experienced systematic discrimination in relation to access to both rental housing and home ownership over a long period of time, with highly segregative results. Indeed, Mexican Americans have become one of the most segregated population groups in U.S. society, and that segregation has increased in recent decades as the group’s population has grown through international migration. According to a recent analysis by the UCLA Civil Rights Project, for example, Mexican Americans are attending public schools under dramatically more segregated conditions than they did in 1970:

With the vast increase of the Latino population, the school segregation of Latinos became much more severe, as areas of segregated housing spread, and white population dropped. Mexican Americans account for about two-thirds of the Latino enrollment in the U.S., and they have experienced the most dramatic increases in segregation. The changes are particularly dramatic in the West. Between 1968, when only one-ninth of Latino students were enrolled in intensely segregated schools, and 1988, their share had more than doubled (27.5%). The share of Latino students in 90-100% minority schools reached 45% of the total Western Latino enrollment by 2011. In 1968, Latinos in the West were only one-fourth as concentrated in intensely segregated schools as those in the Northeast, but now they are the most segregated. The South, clearly influenced by Texas, was much more segregated than the West for Latinos for the first quarter century of this data, but that is no longer true. California, home to more than a fourth of the



nation's Latino students, dominates this story. (Orfield and Frankenberg 2014: 23-24)

Indeed, in Southern California, still home to the largest concentration of Mexican Americans in the country, residential segregation has vastly increased over the past several decades. An analysis of Census Bureau data from 2005 to 2007, reported by Hector Tobar, a columnist for the L.A. Times, found "... that about 1 million people live in Los Angeles County communities that are 90% or more Latino. And more than 800,000 of them are in one contiguous area that stretches from MacArthur Park to Pico Rivera and from the fringes of downtown's Garment District to South Gate. East Los Angeles, it turned out, had become 98% Latino" (Tobar 2008).

Segregated living spaces not only reinforce racialized narratives of false stereotypes and stigmatized identities, they also systematically structure advantages and disadvantages between the groups so segregated. White Americans, in Hayward's analysis, live in mostly white neighborhoods that enable them to enjoy advantages and privileges they fail to see because their lives can be lived as the "norm" for membership in the U.S. polity. People of color, including Mexican Americans, meanwhile, occupy racialized spaces that disadvantage them in multiple ways, beginning with a systematic disinvestment of public and private resources in those "problem" neighborhoods. Lipsitz summarizes some of these as follows:

People of different races do not inhabit different places by choice. Housing and lending discrimination, the design of school district boundaries, zoning regulations, policing strategies, the location of highways and transit systems, and a host of tax subsidies do disastrous work by making places synonymous with races. (Lipsitz 2011: 6)

Since most Americans' wealth comes from real estate equity, the fact that whole neighborhoods and suburbs have been created through the allocation of public and private resources that were distributed in racially discriminatory ways<sup>4</sup> means that Mexican Americans, along with other peoples of color, have been placed at a distinct disadvantage in relation to the accumulation of wealth and its transmission to their offspring. This wealth gap continues to grow as cumulative advantages and disadvantages generate "compound interest," both positive and negative. Mexican Americans, like African Americans, have among the lowest accumulations of wealth in the entire U.S. population. As Lipsitz has summarized the point: "Only 26 percent of white children grow up in asset-poor

households, but 52 percent of blacks and 54 percent of Latinos grow up in these economically fragile households” (Lipsitz 2011: 4). “Segregated housing,” moreover, “leads to segregated schools that give white people privileged treatment, better facilities and better trained teachers. School and neighborhood networks, give them access to insider information which enables them to receive preferential treatment when seeking the 80 to 90 percent of jobs in U.S. society that are never openly advertised to the general public” (Lipsitz 2011: 2-3).

As there is not space here to explore more than a few of the institutional and geographic foundations for structural racialization of Mexican Americans in contemporary U.S. society, this essay will articulate only several that seem to be among the most egregious and foundational. In particular, I will focus on public education, U.S. immigration law, and the neoliberal economic and social policy regime of the past three decades as three foundational institutional structures that play important roles in the perpetuation of racial hierarchy in the case of Mexican Americans.

*Institutional Racialization: Public Education.* As numerous scholars have established, educational achievement constitutes a critical link to avenues of social mobility for Americans from the working and middle classes (see, e.g., Putnam 2015 for the latest in a long line of analyses establishing this link). And few comparative findings have been more consistent than that Mexican Americans are among the groups least successfully engaged by the public educational system. Indeed, apart from American Indians, Mexican Americans rank the lowest of ethno-racial groups on most measures of educational achievement, and have been so ranked since at least the nineteen-sixties. Gándara and Contreras’ recent book on “The Latino Education Crisis” (2009) is only one of many in recent decades aimed at getting the attention of policymakers and the American public regarding the seriousness of the education gap faced by the schools in relation to Latino students (over two-thirds of whom are Mexican Americans). Their findings, consistent with the findings of many other studies, are that Mexican American children arrive at kindergarten already disadvantaged in educational preparation (p. 19), and that most of them never catch up but fall further behind over the years so that nearly half of Mexican American students do not complete high school (p. 23), and that far fewer Mexican American young people complete college degrees than do members of other ethno-racial groups. In fact, they report 2005 Census

data showing that among U.S. young people aged 25-29, only 11.2% of Latinos had completed a baccalaureate degree, while the comparable percentages for African Americans was 17.5% and for whites 34.1% (p. 24), a differential of more than three to one. Again, given the importance of a college degree as a highly significant check-point for social mobility, these are grim statistics indeed.

Many of those who deny the racialization of Mexican Americans account for these relatively low educational attainment rates as a function of lack of cultural adaptation to U.S. society. Perceiving Mexican Americans as a recent immigrant group, these observers expect that over a generation or two most immigrant families will adapt to U.S. culture and language without significant obstacles (especially if the public schools focus on linguistic and cultural assimilation to English as a primary goal), and then more group members will make their way up the social mobility ladder. And some observers (e.g., Chavez 1991; Huntington 2004) fault Hispanic political leaders and intellectuals for wrongly (in their view) working to establish “minority entitlements” for Mexican Americans and other Latino groups.

While every immigrant group must make cultural adaptations to flourish in a new host country, there are at least two important flaws with this assimilationist scenario. The first flaw in the assimilationist account is that, while most living Mexican Americans are from immigrant families, the presence of this ethno-racial group in the U.S. is long-standing, and so is the failure of public schools to find a way to effectively educate most group members. In a 2002 study of intergenerational educational “progress” of Mexican Americans in the United States published by the Public Policy Institute of California, for example, Grogger and Trejo found that the children of immigrants do make a significant leap in educational attainment in comparison with their parents, but then “progress” stalls at levels considerably below those of other ethno-racial groups and has remained stalled over multiple decades: “Intergenerational progress for Mexican Americans appears to stall after the second generation, with only modest improvement in educational attainment and no wage growth observed between the second and third generations” (Grogger and Trejo 2002: viii). Summarizing their findings further, the researchers report: “Substantial education and wage deficits persist between U.S.-born Mexican Americans and other Americans. Among the third generation, for example, Mexican Americans average a year

and a half less schooling and about 25 percent lower wages than non-Hispanic whites” (Grogger and Trejo 2002: viiii-ix).

In a unique longitudinal study, moreover, Telles and Ortiz (2008) have reported a similar result based on their interviews of over 1200 of the original respondents and their children from the largest group of Mexican American respondents surveyed by social scientists in the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Telles and Ortiz found that there had been a slight drop in educational attainment between the original respondents and their offspring (p.130). This evidence does not appear to be pointing toward a steady intergenerational advance in educational attainment among Mexican Americans following their migration to the United States.

In their analysis of the “Latino education crisis,” Gándara and Contreras offer a complex and intertwined set of *institutional* factors that may better account for the continuing failure of public schools to successfully provide Mexican American students with the requisite skills and aptitudes for social mobility. These include a relative paucity of preschools available to Latino students, inadequate school facilities, a continuing “digital divide” demonstrating relative lack of access to technology, inadequate curricular offerings compared to schools populated mostly by whites, the continuation of “tracking” curricular programs that steer a disproportionate percentage of Latino students away from college prep programs and services, the self-fulfilling “prophecy” effect of teachers’ and staff members’ low expectations of performance from Latino students, the relative absence of well-prepared teachers who know how to effectively reach this student population, turnover of too many school leaders having skills for reaching this student population, safety concerns that distract students from effective learning, segregation not only between but *within* schools, the relative lack of extracurricular programs that help prepare other students for success at higher levels of education, and more (Gándara and Contreras 2009: Chapter 3).

As educational researchers, Gándara and Contreras are quick to emphasize that the reasons for the relative lack of educational attainment of Latino students (again, more than two-thirds of whom are Mexican Americans) are far more complex than anyone can expect to be solved by the institutions of public education alone. Indeed, any serious consideration of the list of institutional impediments in the previous paragraph will lead the reader to

factors such as political inattention and deflection of resources to more powerful constituencies, schools located in impoverished communities and neighborhoods with a raft of other problems besides ineffective educational institutions, the relative inability of low-income and often-immigrant parents to draw on social networks and material and human capital resources that might be helpful to their children's educational efforts, etc. The point is that assuming that public education will enable Mexican Americans to easily assimilate to the ladder of social mobility in U.S. society, as the assimilationist narrative recounts in the case of previous immigrant groups, ignores the degree to which the operation of institutional structures such as the public schools impedes rather than facilitates such upward mobility.

The second flaw in the assimilationist account is that positing linguistic assimilation to English as the sole appropriate "cultural" route to economic and social mobility for Mexican Americans is – in itself – a racializing claim. While little evidence exists of resistance to learning English on the part of Mexican American immigrants (survey research consistently shows that nearly all in the group believe that English language competency is valuable and a key requisite for U.S. social mobility), a resounding majority of the group has favored a *bilingual* approach to the education of their children for some four decades. That is, they have wanted their children to be fluently competent in both languages – English *and* Spanish – as a signifier of a well-educated American. Underlying this policy aim is the social and historical reality that the Spanish language has been an American language since at least the annexation of the southwest from Mexico in 1848. As I have argued elsewhere (Schmidt 2002), the continuing efforts of "English-Only" assimilationists to maintain the fiction that Spanish is a "foreign" language in the United States plays an important role in the racializing narrative of Mexican Americans as "forever foreign."

In sum, the weight of the evidence suggests to this writer that the U.S. institutions of public education operate in ways that far too often work to keep Mexican Americans near the bottom of the U.S. racial hierarchy. Further, the ongoing consequences of the failure of these public institutions gives additional staying power to the racialized narrative of Mexican Americans as inassimilable and "forever foreign."

*Institutional Racialization: Immigration Law and Policy.* Another highly significant institutional factor in ramping up and maintaining the “forever foreign” racialization of Mexican Americans is in the operation of the country’s immigration laws. One of the themes that emerges from Ngai’s important study of the social construction of “illegal immigrants” in the twentieth century U.S. is that the *manner* in which the U.S.-Mexican border has been controlled has been racializing in its effects. In sharp distinction from the earlier understanding of the border’s meaning from both nations’ perspectives, Ngai argues: “During the 1920s, immigration policy rearticulated the U.S.-Mexico border as a cultural and racial boundary, as a creator of illegal immigration” (Ngai 2004: 67). Though the story told by most academics of the 1920s-era immigration policy reform has been focused on the exclusion of southern and eastern European immigrants through the national-origins quota system, immigration policy *enforcement* quickly became centered on the southern border with Mexico.

And it was through the very “processes of territoriality and administrative enforcement” required to shore up a previously permeable zone between the two countries that new “racial dimensions of deportation policy” were generated (Ngai 2004: 63). Thus, the work of the Border Patrol in the 1920s “assumed the character of criminal pursuit and apprehension, although officially it was charged with enforcing civil, not criminal, laws . . .” (Ngai 2004: 69), and the criminal pursuit and apprehension was focused almost exclusively on Mexican-origin migrants.

This criminalization of unauthorized immigrants was racializing in that the enforcement of the nation’s boundaries became focused on the U.S.-Mexican border, and the almost immediate result was a conflation of Mexican-origin identity with “illegal immigrant” in ways that continue to reverberate in the contemporary era. Put differently, the “control of the border” focus in policy debates – continually escalated through the political requirements to placate hostile (mostly GOP) lawmakers and voters – involves coercion in a way that actively transforms the identity of the subject being pursued and apprehended. “Illegal alien” and “illegals” become racialized identity markers playing an important role in the shoring up and perpetuation of racial hierarchy in the United States. And, with their jurisdiction expanded far beyond the border region, the Border Patrol

(renamed ICE in 2002) now pursues and deports vast numbers of *Latino* (most of whom are Mexican American) migrants throughout the country.

It cannot be overemphasized that this racializing border control process affects nearly all U.S. Latinos – but especially Mexican Americans – in ways that may not be apparent to many non-Hispanics in the country. The unauthorized migrant population is not concentrated in segregated camps along the border, but is dispersed throughout the country. Accordingly, Mexican American unauthorized migrants live, work, worship, go to school, and play alongside other U.S. citizen and authorized resident Mexican Americans in communities also dispersed throughout the country. ICE’s work of pursuing and apprehending unauthorized Latino migrants, therefore, involves treating millions of U.S. Latinos (mostly Mexican American) as “suspects” identifiable by the same phenotypical appearances used for purposes of racial attribution. This phenomenon necessarily puts most Latinos on edge, and on the defensive, in the presence of ICE officers. It seems evident that the psychological and emotional costs of this process work to support and maintain the subordination of Mexican Americans in the U.S. racial hierarchy.

Intimately related to this constant escalation of efforts to “seal” the southern U.S. border, and to apprehend and remove undocumented migrants in the interior, recent expansions and elaborations of immigration control measures have significantly enhanced the racializing effects of this phenomenon. As part of their campaign to control the border, many immigration critics describe their policy aims as seeking to encourage the “self-deportation” of undocumented immigrants already in the country. Beginning with California’s Proposition 187 in 1994, and continuing through Congress’ passage of the Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRAIRA) and a major reform of Federal welfare policy in 1996, through the passage of H.R. 4437 in 2005 by the GOP-controlled U.S. House of Representatives, to a growing series of laws adopted by state and local governments in recent years (e.g., Arizona’s S.B. 1070, passed in 2010, later overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court; Alabama’s H.B. 56, passed in 2011; etc.), exclusionary politicians and their allies have sought to make daily life so difficult and dangerous for undocumented immigrants that they will “voluntarily” return to their homelands. Among the specific policies enacted in this concerted campaign are the following:

- making it a punishable crime for undocumented immigrants to gather in public spaces for purposes of seeking day labor assignments with homeowners and small business owners;
- making it a punishable crime to rent a living space knowingly to any undocumented immigrant;
- requiring public school officials to inquire into the immigration status of their students and their students' parents, and to publicly report the number and costs of educating both authorized and unauthorized immigrants;
- requiring state and local law enforcement officials to cooperate with Federal immigration officials by reporting and holding for deportation any unauthorized immigrant accused of any crime;
- requiring public social services workers (e.g., in agencies offering health care, parenting assistance, employment counseling, public assistance) to deny their services to all undocumented immigrants;
- forbidding public colleges and universities from enrolling or providing financial aid to unauthorized persons in their institutions;
- increasing penalties for employers hiring unauthorized immigrants as workers, and increasing pressure on employers to verify the immigration status of undocumented workers.

As noted, the avowed aim of exclusionary activists and legislators in enacting these and similar policies is to make everyday life so difficult and fear-inducing that undocumented immigrants will voluntarily return to their home countries, and to take their children (including U.S. citizens) home with them. This is done by increasing pressure on persons (public employees, landlords, potential employers) publicly interacting regularly with Latino and migrant populations to heighten their mindfulness of those who might be lacking the proper documents, and to terminate any unlawful transactions with the undocumented.<sup>6</sup>

None of these laws, of course, mentions race in any way, nor do they explicitly target any defined "racial" group. In what sense, then, might these be racializing policies? As lawyers who have challenged these laws in court have pointed out, it is virtually impossible to *implement* policies such as those listed above without engaging in racial discrimination.



That is, almost no one expects that public employees, potential employers, landlords, school administrators, etc., will check the legal status of *every* person with whom they may have a transaction that is covered by these laws. This means they will have to exercise discretion in determining whom to challenge for the proper documentation. And since public discourse in relation to unauthorized immigrants continues to be focused almost exclusively on those from Latin America, and especially from Mexico, once again it is those persons who *appear* to have origins in Latin America who will be most likely to experience the various ordeals designed to encourage unauthorized immigrants to self-deport.

Both news reports and legal documents filed by the laws' opponents are replete with narratives describing the climate of fear and intimidation engendered among many Latinos in the U.S. – including those with multiple generations of citizenship in the U.S. – as a result of the campaigns to pass anti-immigration laws at state and local levels in the past several years. This pattern of creating a climate of fear and intimidation in an entire ethno-racial community can be understood best as working to reinforce, and indeed to extend and deepen, the country's racial hierarchy. In this sense, the border control policies demanded by immigration critics, as well as the refusal of most conservative ideologues and public officials to engage in serious support for immigration policy reform in the U.S. contributes to the institutional perpetuation of the racializing narrative directed at Mexican Americans and other Latinos in the contemporary political era.

*Institutional Racialization: Neoliberal Economic and Social Policy.* The third institutional policy regime to be sketched here that contributes significantly to the perpetuation of racial hierarchy in the U.S. is the adoption of neoliberal economic and social policies over the past four decades. The “great u-turn”<sup>7</sup> in U.S. economic and social policy is often traced by scholars to a 1971 memorandum, written by Lewis Powell and commissioned by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Powell's highly influential memo called upon the business community and political conservatives to launch a systematic counterattack against the social liberal policy regime then in ascendance in the U.S. since the New Deal. However that may be, by the time Ronald Reagan was elected President in 1980, the U.S. government was in full retreat from the relatively expansive social and economic policies promoted by President Lyndon B. Johnson under the “Great Society” banner.

For the past thirty-five years, the U.S. government and most state governments have adopted a series of tax and budget cuts and policy changes that have systematically removed important rungs in the social mobility “ladders” of the United States. Access to early childhood education programs for low-income children has been dramatically cut back, low income children’s access to extracurricular activities and curriculum enrichment programs has been curtailed, low income youths’ access to higher education has become far more restricted, bilingual education has been eliminated from most public schools, public funding for infrastructure improvements in low income and minority neighborhoods has been slashed, access to public income supports has been decreased through “welfare reform” and other measures, multiple public programs for job training and retraining have been eliminated, hard-won policy supports for labor union organizing have been watered down and many have been eliminated, consumer protections for low-income people have been threatened, “deregulation” schemes have been adopted for a number of industries, affirmative action programs have been dismantled, many public transportation systems have been in decline for decades, . . . the list could be expanded for paragraphs.

Under the mantra of doing the poor a favor by denying them the opportunity to become “dependent” on public largesse, political conservatives have worked hard to roll back public services and benefits that enabled many low-income Americans in earlier generations to acquire the human and financial capital enabling them to move up a rung or two in the U.S. social hierarchy. Further cutbacks loom large as the Republicans have taken control of houses of the U.S. Congress, and the Supreme Court appears poised to strike down much of what little remains of the “second Reconstruction.” Although virtually none of these policy changes have highlighted “race” as a primary rationale, the argument I want to make here is that they constitute a highly important reinforcement of racial hierarchy in the United States, a reinforcement that has worked to “lock in” most Mexican Americans in the lowest rungs of the social ladder.

Numerous studies have focused recently on the fact that social and economic inequality in the United States has increased significantly in the decades since 1970, and that upward social mobility has become more rare. Indeed, comparative data shows that the U.S. has become one of the most inegalitarian societies in the so-called developed world (see, e.g., Putnam 2015). What makes this “new” inequality “racialized” is that it works to

trap a relatively high percentage of African Americans and Mexican Americans (along with many other people) in the lower classes. Having been previously racially stigmatized and shoved into racialized spaces with little access to earlier avenues to social mobility (as sketched above), most Mexican Americans now confront a socio-economic order far more unequal and relatively “frozen” than even earlier generations of the same group. This is certainly part of the meaning of scholarly findings of “segmented assimilation” for many Mexican American immigrants in recent generations (see, e.g., Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Zhou 1997). In fact, Massey (2007) concludes his analysis of Mexican Americans as a new “underclass” in dramatic fashion:

The evidence reviewed in this chapter suggests that U.S. policies are moving Mexican Americans steadily . . . toward formation as an underclass. Segregation levels are rising, discrimination is increasing, poverty is deepening, educational levels are stagnating, and the social safety net has been deliberately poked full of holes to allow immigrants to fall through. Whether or not Mexicans become a new urban underclass remains to be seen, but it is already clear that after occupying a middle socioeconomic position between whites and blacks for generations, the economic fortunes of Mexicans have now fallen to levels at or below those of African Americans. (Massey 2007: 157)

Indeed, it is perhaps ironic that the high levels of Mexican immigration (feeding the “forever foreign” characterization of Mexican Americans) have been used by a number of political activists and scholars to undermine the political legitimacy of public services generally and more specific social and economic programs that might have worked to reduce the growing rigidity of the racialized social hierarchy in U.S. society (see, e.g., Chavez 1991; Graham 2002; LaNoue and Sullivan 2001).

Other scholars have argued, however, that this phenomenon is not ironic at all, but the result of a deliberate racialization of U.S. electoral politics in which conservative, and especially Republican Party candidates for high political office have systematically and deliberately played upon – and stoked – the racial fears of white voters in order to win elections. Using campaign tactics aimed at convincing white voters that socially and economically egalitarian policies are stratagems devised by minorities and the politicians who pander to them to rob “honest (white) working folk” of their means and hard-earned assets, “dog whistle” politics have effectively “wrecked the middle class” (Haney Lopez

2014). In Haney Lopez' analysis of "dog whistle" politics, the anti-immigration rhetoric directed against Mexican Americans and other Latino immigrants has come to play a prominent role in this racialized political discourse. Other scholars have made different, but largely synergistic analyses also pointing to the racialized causes *and* effects of the largely dominant neoliberal U.S. policy regime of the past four decades (in addition to Haney Lopez 2014, see, e.g., HoSang 2010; Lang 2015; Melamed 2011).

**Conclusion: Toward a New Political Science Focus on Racialization.**

There are, obviously, many more aspects to the racialization of Mexican Americans that could be taken up here, and that need increased attention by political scientists. In closing this paper, I want to suggest that more political scientists need to take up these studies. It seems clear to this writer that there is sufficient evidence presented above to warrant the claim that Mexican Americans have been – and continue to be – a racialized minority group in U.S. society, even though they are also most definitely an "immigrant ethnic" group. As I read the evidence, at any rate, the U.S. ethnoracial hierarchy has become increasingly rigid as a result of policy changes and political strategies deployed by economic and racial conservatives over the past four decades. And it is also clear to me as well that Mexican Americans – despite the growth of a relatively well-off middle class among members of this group – continue to be targets of both stigmatizing stories of "racial" difference, and to suffer from the institutionalization and objectification of such racializing stories through increasingly rigid social structures.

The last point I want to make here is that most of the evidence I have cited in this paper has been generated not by political scientists, but by scholars from other social science disciplines. There are political scientists who have contributed important work on issues of racialization, but they are too few in number and have made too little impact on the discipline. Doing this kind of work requires a willingness to make interpretive observations and judgments about political narratives and about social, political, and economic structures of power and power relations more generally. This kind of work would also benefit greatly from ethnographic and in-depth interviews, critical framing and discourse analyses practiced by too few political scientists. I believe strongly that survey research and controlled scientific experiments have made and can continue to make important and necessary contributions to the study of the racialization of U.S. population

groups, but these methods alone cannot suffice to resolve these important political questions. So I conclude by urging my fellow political scientists to increase their interpretive work on racialization, and to work to expand the education of their graduate students to enable them to address these important political questions with all the methodological tools that can be mustered.

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<sup>1</sup> My understanding of racism and racialization has been shaped by a wide variety of

<sup>2</sup> For historical overviews that highlight the racialization narrative, see, e.g., Acuña 2014; Gonzalez 2011.

<sup>3</sup> See Molina (2006) for a book-length analysis of the emerging public health profession's role in racializing Mexican Americans as unclean, diseased, and inassimilable.

<sup>4</sup> On this point, see, e.g., Hayward 2013; Katznelson 2005; Roithmayr 2014; Troutt 2013.

<sup>5</sup> The original survey of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles and San Antonio was published in Grebler et al. 1970.

<sup>6</sup> For recent descriptions and analyses of these exclusionary policy efforts see, e.g., Brotherton and Kretsedemas, 2008; HoSang, 2010; Jacobson, 2008; Newton, 2008; Schrag, 2010; Varsanyi, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> So-termed by Bluestone and Harrison, 1990.

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