

“Off the Backs of Others”: The Political ecology of credit, debt, and class formation and transformation among the Colonias of New Mexico and Elsewhere¹

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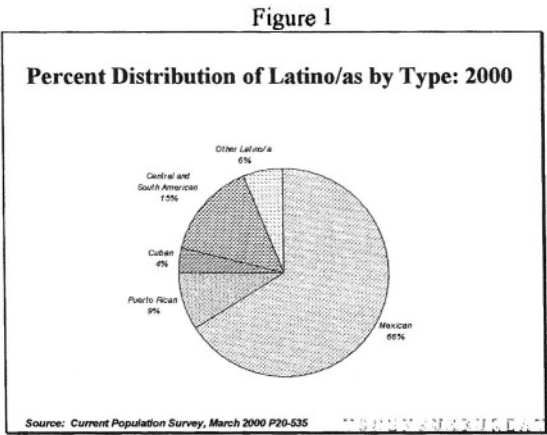
In few places are the costs of globalization more deeply felt than in the lives of those living in U.S. Mexican rural “colonias” that line the border between the U.S. and Mexico. Their physical and ecological disparities are similar to those suffered by migrating populations to cities all over Latin America 40 years previously but now extend into the United States as well. In fact, there are over 1,800 such communities that began in the early 1980’s and now are inhabited by between 900,000 to a million Mexican-origin residents in the southwestern United States. These arise particularly in the border states of Texas and New Mexico, while emergent colonias exist in Southern California and Arizona. These populations suffer tertiary labor conditions at the minimum wage, without health coverage, legal protection, or promise of future employment. Seventy percent of households are engaged in the informal economy and others are forced into underground economies that create even greater anxiety, and insecurity for all members of already stressed households.²

Yet these populations are a small part of a much larger demographic transition and increase of Mexican/Latino populations to the United States. And although the central focus of this work concentrates on the political and economic ecology of colonias the broader theoretical question that arises is the manner in which these population, and many other similarly situated Mexican/Latino(a) populations in urban and rural contexts, in fact subsidize their own lack of income, lack of infrastructures, community development, institutional support, and ecological inequities by engaging in far-flung social and economic practices that attempt to mitigate these disparities.

We take a political ecology approach that basically is a method that is inclusive of the complex relations between polity, economy, and physical and environmental resource use. This approach recently articulated by Greenberg and Park (1994:8) states that “the environment ranges from the largely cultural. . .through the intensely political. . .to the natural” (unculturalized physical resources or even climate itself). This approach does have a variety of theoretical lineal ancestors including Marx and even the less revolutionary thinkers like Adam Smith and Richard Ricardo. They all share a common vision of the absolute inseparability of economics from politics since inevitably class interests emerge from the inequitable distribution of value and resources and such interests will pursue their own welfare.³ The natural environment is a crucial exploitive

base upon which the political economy rests as an extractive source and eventually becomes a culturally-defined artifact that seems “natural” through practice, legislation, imposition, control, and made marketable. In the present, the sale of water, long held to be a physical resource held in common for use has become like any other commodity to be sold in the market place. Thus this “natural” artifact has become commoditized and perhaps eventually the case may arise when homosapiens has so polluted the air that special “pure” air tanks may become part of the market place as well.

But to gain a sense of the breadth of what is addressed we need to consider the dynamic demographic processes in the U.S. in which Mexican/Latino populations are engaged. I use the term Mexican/Latino as the basic reference for as Figure 1 illustrates, in which the great majority of Latino populations are in fact Mexicans: 66 percent, Puerto Ricans: 9 percent, Cubans: 4 percent, Central and South American 15 percent, and Others: 6 percent. However, of crucial importance is that by 2025 fully 30 percent of the population of the United will in fact be Mexican/Latino, and will more than likely also have similar income and educational attainment.



Characteristics like those shown in Figures 2 illustrate that almost 35 percent of Mexicans earn less than \$10,000 annually.